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FEATURES

- David Brin: To Read *The Separation*: 1
Alec Austin: Quality In Epic Fantasy: 1
Ken MacLeod: Does Science Fiction Have to Be About the Present?: 14
Justin Wescoat Sanders: An Interview with Orson Scott Card: 15
David G. Hartwell: Middle High Sturgeon: 20

REVIEWS

- Land/Space: An Anthology of Prairie Speculative Fiction*, edited by Candace Jane Dorsey and Judy McCrosky,
reviewed by James L. Cambias: 7
Juliet Marlier's *Wolfskin*, reviewed by Michael Cule: 11
Kij Johnson's *Fudoki*, reviewed by Joe Sutcliffe Sanders: 12
Karen Traviss's *City of Pearl*, reviewed by Farah Mendlesohn: 13
Rosemary Kirstein's *The Lost Steersman*, reviewed by Jenny Blackford: 18
Mike Brotherton's *Star Dragon*, reviewed by David Mead: 19
Leigh Kennedy's *The Journal of Nicholas the American*, reviewed by Joe Sanders: 23

PLUS

- Plus: Rudolf Hess's plan (8), Langford at Random (16), real sf & real anime (20), some screed (22), and an editorial (24)!
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David Brin

To Read *The Separation*

Christopher Priest's novel *The Separation* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2002; £10.99 pb; 464 pages) is a parallel or alternate reality story, though one aiming at a different tradition than many of the "what-if" scenarios we've seen from the likes of Harry Turtledove, L. Sprague de Camp, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Steve Barnes.

Most modern science fictional treatments of this concept revolve around a breakpoint, a special moment when some choice or event toppled a different way than it did in our own past. The author then takes great pains to work out a resulting divergence. Whether the emphasis is sociological, as in Barnes's *Lion's Blood* and Robinson's *Years of Rice and Salt*, or more on dynamic adventures-of-consequence, as in many works by Turtledove, the common tradition is to create lavish ripples of cause and effect, with much the same kind of joy that a master mechanic puts into making a hot rod. The altered world is fully as much a character as any of the walking, talking protagonists. It can surprise the author, even make its creator obey.

In other words, most practitioners of the art try to follow certain common practices (if not rules) that provide a sense of rigor, or at least fairness, in the way events follow after the breakpoint in history. But not all.

Take Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* or *Invitation to a Beheading*, an alternate reality novel without any clear chain of causality. Rather than dwell on antecedents and effects, Nabokov crafted a vague backdrop for Imperial Russian expatriates to rebuild fragments of Czarist elegance in a different North America. Greg Bear calls *Invitation* "a fussy, elegant justification for aristocracy and endless summers of pre-adolescent love."

A subordinate aim in this kind of tale is not experimental universe-building, but instead creating the right conditions for the projection of authorial desires. It can be constructed in reverse order, starting with some desired outcome, then pre-stacking a few convenient "causal" events. The result is then a Neverland where characters may enjoy satisfactions that the author lacks in this world.

This kind of alternate universe is deliciously satirized by Norman Spinrad's metanovel *The Iron Dream*, set in a parallel reality where Adolf Hitler became an emigrant science fiction author, whose epic—a marvelous Spinradian extrapolation—takes all the races and classes that Hitler murdered in *our* world and turns them into slightly-masked *his* narrative "mutants." Like J. R. R. Tolkien's orcs in Middle Earth, these thinly disguised Jews, Gypsies, and varied non-Aryans deserve no mercy and get none. Moreover, the background situation and plot are all contrived by the author—by Spinrad's Hitler—solely to achieve their annihilation.

I doubt many critics would lump *Invitation* together with *The Iron Dream*. For one thing, the latter is beringly self-aware. Still, they both help illustrate a subgenre—one that merits pondering, whether or not it ultimately seems a fair place to assign Christopher Priest's novel, *The Separation*.

At the surface, at least, Priest's work bears a much closer resemblance to Nabokov than Spinrad. *The Separation* is inward-looking, passive-voiced, contemplative, agonized, with frequent

Special Three Sanders Issue

David Brin Interrogates *The Separation*
Alec Austin on the Exhaustion in Epic Fantasy
David Hartwell on Middle-High Sturgeon
Ken McLeod on What SF Is About
Justin Sanders Interviews Orson Scott Card
Joe Sanders reviews Leigh Kennedy
Joe Sutcliffe Sanders reviews Kij Johnson's *Fudoki*
Plus Dave Langford's Random Reviews, some
Opinions on Anime, some Screeds, & an Editorial!

Alec Austin

Quality in Epic Fantasy

Two of the most common complaints about epic fantasy are that it is dominated by series and that most of those series are formulaic and of low quality. As a longtime reader of the genre, I cannot argue either point. Most of the fantasy series I've read over the course of my life have ranged from mediocre to downright wretched. And yet the few excellent books I found were sufficient to keep me sifting through an endless morass of Tolkien clones and gaming-derived fiction, wondering all the while why so much of what I found was so awful.

The traditional response to why much epic fantasy is bad is that the genre is exhausted, with each new book or series drawing on the same patterns as its commercially successful predecessors. But while there is more than a grain of truth in that complaint, the explanation is insufficient. After all, Tolkien drew extensively on Celtic and Norse mythology as well as the patterns found in the works of authors like Lord Dunsany and E. R. Eddison when he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, and writers have fruitfully rehearsed the legends of Camelot and King Arthur for centuries. Modern works such as Sean Stewart's *Nobody's Son* and George R. R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* are only further evidence that nothing is inherently wrong with stories that use magic wands, dragons, and other elements from fairy tales and folklore. Ultimately, the problems that plague many epic fantasies are not a result of the exhaustion of the traditional elements of fantasy as much as a symptom of the inexcusably crude manner in which they are used on the page.

All fiction requires a balance between elements of the strange and the familiar. But where strangeness in a contemporary novel may be restricted to personal idiosyncrasies on the part of the characters, in a fantasy it must be more pronounced, as evinced by significant differences between the world of the story and that of contemporary reality. Over years of commercial exploitation, however, many elements of strangeness in fantasy have been used so badly they have come to seem mundane, and where once readers thrilled to tales of knights and dragons, they now yaw at cover copy promising thrilling quests and look for something less tedious to read about.

(Continued on page 8)

(Continued on page 4)

Quality in Epic Fantasy

continued from page 1

As I stated earlier, I do not believe there is anything inherently wrong with even the most overused elements of epic fantasy. Magic swords, dragons, destined heroes—even dark lords and ultimate evils can legitimately be used in literature of serious intent, not just mocked in satirical metafiction. To claim that they cannot would be much the same as claiming that nothing good can ever again be done with fiction involving detectives, or young lovers, or unhappy families. The value of a fictive element is not an inherent quality but a contextual one, determined by its relationship to the other elements of the story it is embedded in.

In other words, whether a scene in which a dragon is introduced is affecting, amusing, or agonizingly dull depends primarily on the choices made by the scene's author. I say "primarily" because dragons have appeared in thousands of stories over the centuries, and almost any reader may be presumed to have been exposed to at least one such. The reader's reaction will naturally be influenced by how they feel this new dragon compares to the dragons which they have been introduced to in the past. (Favorably, one would hope. A dragon must learn to make a good first impression if it is to do well in this life.) Such variables are out of the author's control, as are any unreasoning prejudices against dragons on the part of the reader. All that can be done is to make the dragon as vivid and well suited for its purpose as possible. If all the elements of fantasy and fiction in a work are fitted to their purposes and combine to create a moving story set in a convincing world, that work will presumably be a masterpiece.

This is, of course, much more easily described than done.

The purpose of this essay is to describe the factors that produce good epic fantasy in useful terms; or at least, terms more useful than, "one must use every fictive element in one's fiction as well as it can be used," which is about as immediately clear and helpful as a Zen koan. Towards this goal, I will essay a working definition of epic fantasy, discuss some of the genre's common failings, and further examine the relationship between the strange and the familiar in fantastic fiction.

Definitions

Any extended discussion of a genre begs the question of exactly which group of works the author is addressing. A discussion of epic fantasy is further complicated by the fact that one must define not only what one means by fantasy, but by the adjective attached to it as well.

For some help with this business of definitions, I turn to Professor Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories," in which he tells us that "the definition of a fairy-story . . . does not [depend] on any definition or account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of Faerie: the Perilous Realm itself." Very well, then, what is the nature of Faerie? "Enchantment, [which] produces a Secondary World into which both dreamer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside."

While Professor Tolkien's definition is helpful, it bears more than a passing resemblance to those koans I promised to avoid earlier. Let us turn to Ursula K. Le Guin for clarification. Regarding young fantasy writers, she tells us that "they all know instinctively what is wanted in fantasy is a *distancing from the ordinary*" (emphasis in the original). This, combined with Tolkien's definition, tells us what fantasy stories are: stories set in secondary or invented worlds that are distant or otherwise distinct from the world in which we live our everyday lives.

To this definition we add the adjective "epic." To describe a work as epic implies great scope, literal or emotional. Epic fantasy, then, addresses the sweeping and significant—grand passions, fundamental issues of morality, the fate of the world—displaced from the context and concerns of modern life. Such a definition is perhaps over-inclusive, as it includes much science fiction. But though my examples will focus on commercial fantasy, excluding works such as Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* from discussions of quality in epic fantasy would be absurd, for they draw on the same sources as epic fantasy and share many of the same qualities.

Common Failings

The question of what makes an epic fantasy bad is a misleading

one, as it implies that the criteria for quality in epic fantasy are separate from those of any other realm of literature. There is nothing more harmful to the literary health of a genre than the belief that its works are subject to special standards of evaluation. Though, as John Gardner says in *The Art of Fiction*, every work of literature "must be judged primarily, though not exclusively, by its own laws," this is not the same as saying that the author of an adventure story is relieved of the obligation to portray emotionally convincing characters, because characterization is not the main focus of their work. Epic fantasy can reasonably be expected to possess a distinctive setting, realistic characters, and a coherent and interesting narrative structure. This list is far from exhaustive or complete, but an examination of the epic fantasy on bookstore shelves will show that of much it fails to satisfactorily fulfill at least one, if not all, of the criteria listed above.

Before I go further, I should add the appropriate use of language to my list. Le Guin discussed some aspects of this very problem in her essay, "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie," found in *The Language of the Night*, but as that book is out of print, many of her points bear repetition. I will briefly discuss the most common ways in which epic fantasies fail in their use of language, setting, character, and narrative structure, and how such failures may best be avoided.

Language

There are two primary ways in which authors can misuse language in epic fantasy. The first is to have the narrative voice slip into a tone inappropriate to the subject being discussed. The second is to have the characters speak in a way that is inappropriate to their character and circumstances.

My use of the word "inappropriate" is vague, but attempting to specify the ways an author could misapply language in an epic fantasy would be both futile and interminable. The use of anachronistic phrases and speech patterns is but one example. The words "okay" and "cool" would be out of place in any serious work, as would any other modern colloquialism or turn of phrase. In general, the narrative voice should be kept consistent, simple, and relatively formal in tone, while dialogue should fit both its speaker and the tone of the story. Peasants speaking in dactylic hexameter would be as improper as a civilized king lacing his speech with profanities. Indeed, if an author is pursuing the elevated, dreamlike tone of a fairy tale or myth, it may be inappropriate for even the basest villains to pepper their speech with vulgarity. Aristotle's golden mean should be the author's guide: Narrative and dialogue should be neither too flat and journalistic nor too ornate and cluttered with forced archaisms or words like "ichor" and "tenebrous." Nothing undermines a story more quickly than a failed attempt to sound like Chaucer or Lovecraft.

Setting

Even if authors manage to keep anachronisms and ichor from drenching their prose, they still must depict worlds that are not only distinct from the generic fantasyland of much recent fiction but also emotionally and logically convincing. Once again, the tone an author is striving for is crucial. A high fantasy with an elevated tone and clear moral distinctions between the protagonists and their opponents will call for a dramatically different backdrop than a story of ambiguous morality and realistic social concerns. The first will lie closer to the idealized world of fairy tales than the latter, which calls for a world more like the historical middle ages, mired in excrement, violence, and poverty. The works of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis's Narnia books are high fantasy, for example, while the works of Sean Stewart and George R. R. Martin are not.

Furthermore, unless the story being told is a fairy tale or fable, the world it is set in should be firmly based in some combination of history and myth, not merely copied from the world of another writer or vague memories of high school history classes. So familiar and well-trodden have the fields of Middle Earth and its imitators become that all it takes is the shorthand of castles and elves and ancient ruins and horse-people to bring a world to the minds of many readers: an impoverished, cardboard world, with all the joy and magic drained out of it by decades of exploitation. Certainly some readers are content to read stories set in variations on the stock worlds of fantasy, with their romanticized versions of feudalism, but it is saddening that so many

books fail to exploit the possibilities that even a cursory examination of actual medieval history reveals.

Indeed, the relative homogeneity of the worlds and societies in which most fantasy novels are set seems to betray a failure of imagination and education on the part of many authors. With the near-infinite variety of religious beliefs that people have held over the centuries, ranging from Gnostic heresies to all the varieties of Buddhism, why do fantastic religions invariably separate into familiar variants on Christianity, neo-paganism, and polytheism? With the variety of relationships to government that have evolved over the years, why do so many enlightened feudal monarchies, evil empires, and corrupt oligarchies crowd the shelves of bookstores? A little research will turn up an endless variety of governmental and religious practices: The electoral monarchy of the Spartans, the medieval commonwealth of Iceland, and the near-anarchic feudalism of the Holy Roman Empire spring to mind, as do the Hindu caste system, the original philosophy of Taoism, and the pseudo-magical religion that grew out of it.

A knowledge of classical literature and history is thus vital to any writer who wishes to create a distinctive world—the religious practices misreported in Herodotus's *Histories*, for instance, are more bizarre and thought-provoking than those of a dozen modern novels, while T. H. White's translation of a medieval bestiary provides its reader with the surprising knowledge that the panther's sweet breath attracts its prey but drives off dragons. Not only do books and poems like the *Ramayana*, the Icelandic Sagas, and the *Romances of the Three Kingdoms* provide material and ideas that can be absorbed for later use, but by studying the source material behind previous works of art, a writer can trace the threads of allusion and reference that run through them and enrich their understanding of how they were written. Through the recombination of familiar ideas and specific details taken from one's studies, an author can make the country of knights and castles and dragons seem fresh and new or create even stranger worlds to set their stories in.

Character

No matter how fascinating the world a story is set in may be, if the characters it concerns are uninteresting or underdeveloped, the story will be a failure. Even more than sloppy world creation and the misuse of language, failures of characterization plague the epic fantasy novel.

But while the tired nature of many heroes and heroines in epic fantasy is tedious enough (a naive/sniveling/self-pitying young boy/girl discovers that he/she has been Chosen to save the country/world/universe), the characterization of their antagonists is often worse. The unalloyed goodness of protagonists and rank evil of villains clearly seem to appeal to a certain kind of reader, but such hackneyed and one-dimensional characterization saps a story of any real emotional power or relevance it might otherwise possess. Even the most elevated and fantastic story must possess a certain amount of emotional realism in the way it portrays its characters, or it becomes no more than a puppet-play, with caricatures of pure good and evil battling it out while the author jerks them about on their strings. Not only is the simplification of complex human motives to black and white bad art, it's morally reprehensible as well: There are more than enough people in this world who believe that everyone who disagrees with them is incurably evil and misguided without authors perpetuating that toxic belief system through fiction.

This is not to say that all villains and antagonists should be sympathetic, but rather that those who get any reasonable amount of page time should possess recognizable human traits. The greatest fantasists manage this as a matter of course. Consider Tolkien's orcs and the bitterness of their bickering over what to do with Pippin and Merry, or the vindictive hatred which Acheen feels for Arawn in Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain*. If one must have a being of pure inhuman malevolence, it is generally best kept as a speechless, faceless presence, as Sauron was, for if evil is given a face it should be its familiarity, and not its strangeness, which frightens us—the knowledge that there, but for the grace of god, go we.

I have concentrated on questions of moral complexity and believability because flaws of characterization in epic fantasy often grow out of them. All that has been said about the necessity of

antagonists being recognizable as human goes double or triple for protagonists. As the main character(s) will probably be the lens through which the reader perceives the story's events, they should probably be more perceptive, driven, or prone to dramatic action than the members of their supporting cast. After all, if they aren't, why should we care about them?

Narrative Structure

We come at last to the issue of narrative structure, which is usually either the foundation of a work's success or the primary reason for its failure. What is often referred to as a story's "plot" is an extremely abstracted description of a story's narrative structure, telling the person who hears it little to nothing about the actual arrangement of fictive elements that form the text. This is why though two stories may share essentially the same "plot," they may vary widely in their actual texts and the quality thereof. It is all but impossible to generalize about successful narrative structures, since any time a novel demonstrates how one may be used to good effect, another one will come along and use a similar or identical structure very badly. Truly bad ones are somewhat easier to pin down: Despite the claims of the disciples of George Lucas and Joseph Campbell, the pattern of the Hero's Journey is a fairly bad narrative structure, if only because its rigidity makes it agonizingly predictable. Indeed, predictability is the greatest defect in the narrative structures common to epic fantasy. The average modern fantasy novel reeks of industrial mass-production. One can practically reconstruct the checklists and flowcharts which some authors were working from after a cursory examination of their work.

The problem with predictability, of course, is that it utterly destroys any possibility of genuine suspense. Very young children or the terminally naive may believe that the heroes of an interminable fantasy series might die at the hands of the enemies who have captured them, but the more cynical of us know that if that occurred, the series could not continue to rake in money for its author and publisher. Even if the characters die, the probability that they will be arbitrarily resurrected approaches unity and so—no matter what happens to them—nothing is really in jeopardy because we know that good will triumph over evil in the end. Everything that transpires between the moment our heroes hear of the evil that threatens the world and their inevitable triumph over it is just filler.

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It is not difficult to avoid this trap. All the author has to do is signal early on that their world contains real danger for their protagonists, and that their victory, even their survival, is not assured. This can be done with various degrees of subtlety, ranging from having characters come from unhappy origins that demonstrate the world's risks, to killing a well-developed and sympathetic character without warning, but in one way or another, something must clearly be at stake in a story for it to grab the reader's attention. Since clichéd fantasy conventions such as prophecies and powerful companions swarming around the main characters undermine a sense of real danger, they should be dispensed with, or else used in such a way that their goals do not necessarily correspond to the main characters' best interests. Without jeopardy, after all, there is no suspense; without suspense a story has no emotional impact; and without emotional impact, there is no reason for a serious story to be read.

The above comments are generally directed at problems of suspense in individual works of fantasy. However, because of the current publishing climate, it is rare that a work of epic fantasy will be complete within two covers, or that it will escape unsequenced, as authors and publishers attempt to build up profitable franchises. While there is nothing wrong with the multi-volume fantasy if all the volumes function independently or were planned as part of a single work, I submit that the pursuit of fantasy franchises is one of the greatest enemies of quality in the genre, because the influence of market forces often results in having a popular novel or series of novels relished *ad nauseum*, with plot arcs suspended indefinitely by the neck until dead.

I will refer to the two easiest means of extending a fantasy series beyond its natural lifespan as the Robert Jordan method and the David Eddings method, though neither method is exclusive to or was originated by the writer I have named it for. The Jordan method involves the maintenance of the status quo from book to book in the same way a television series aiming for syndication maintains the status quo: putting the characters through a combination of trivial events that change nothing, or a series of "important" events that cancel each other out, changing nothing and advancing the story only minutely. The Eddings method involves a repetition of story structure from book to book or series to series, so that even if the characters involved in a book or series are different from those in the author's previous work, the reader can immediately recognize them and their situation as parallel to that of the work they enjoyed last time. Both methods are reassuring to the reader, promising them more of what they enjoyed before, which accounts for their appeal. Both methods also undermine the literary and emotional power of the stories they tell, because they rely upon the robotic repetition of story structure. And since these methods are the easiest methods of continuing a successful series, their fruits requiring less thought to produce than books with original narrative structures or genuine conclusions, they have all but drowned the few sequels or connected works of value on the shelves.

Le Guin argues in "From Elliland to Poughkeepsie" that the products of such assembly-line literary production are not fantasy because their authors "use all the trappings of fantasy without ever actually imagining anything." Sadly, the day that such a definitional argument might have had any power is gone, as the works of Jordan, Brooks, Goodkind, et al. are already marked as fantasy on their spines. Genre critics must content themselves with the observation that they are *bad* fantasy, not only because they fail as literature, but because instead of making the commonplace strange and wondrous again, they turn the rich ore of myth, folklore, and magic into mundane lead.

What the perpetrators of the endless trilogies that dog bookstore shelves do not seem to grasp is that their attempts to reproduce the wonder of, for example, *The Lord of the Rings* are doomed by the very methods they employ. Just as the qualities of a summer night cannot be reduced to a formula or a checklist, the insight and passion that move us in works of great literature cannot be canned, shrink-wrapped, or faked. Frankenstein's monster might have had all the bones, organs, and muscles of a living man, but without the breath of life, it would only have rotted on the good doctor's slab. To treat the elements of myth and nightmare as if they were as interchangeable as computer parts is as incompetent as it is crass.

Strangeness and Familiarity

As I said in my introduction, all literature depends on a balance between the strange and the familiar; between the ideas and images that capture the attention of readers, and those necessary to construct the context and emotional framework that keeps their more exciting cousins from dissolving into incoherence. Works of fantasy naturally tend to lean more heavily towards elements of the strange, as they are, at least theoretically, their stock in trade. But while it is elements of strangeness and originality that make readers wake up and pay attention to a story, the power of those elements to move readers and keep their attention is a matter of how well integrated they are with helvetic elements that readers can recognize from their own experience. Tolkien wrote that "fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it." Certainly Middle Earth and its kin among imagined worlds have the power to awe us with the depth and detail of their construction, but the reason we read the books that are set in them is the stories they tell: stories which, if they are to move us, must deal with recognizable human problems and be true to either our experience of life or our sense of how things could or should be.

Familiarity, then, is not a bad thing, either in fantasy or elsewhere. Not only does it give readers a sense that they understand what is going on, but it allows the author to use that assumption for his or her own ends. Furthermore, the reason the elements of fairy tales and folklore are familiar to us is because they have lasted centuries, even millennia, which is a testament to the power they have over the human imagination. Our familiarity with the elements of fantasy only becomes a problem when we take the familiar for granted and cheapen it by treating it as if it is merely what it seems on the surface. Despite the peculiar arrogance of our age, our knowing the rough shape and species of a tree does not mean we know about the nest a bird has built in the hollow between its branches, how long it has stood there, or what other secrets it hides. In the same way, familiar elements of fiction often possess great depths of potential that are not immediately obvious. A dragon is not just a big snake, and a magic sword is not merely a very sharp piece of steel—at least, not unless an author fails to make anything more out of them. The stock elements of fantasy are only as dull as we allow them to be.

What, then, are the sources of quality in epic fantasy? An unwillingness on the part of an author to settle for work that is shoddy, incoherent, clichéd, or otherwise trivial or superficial, joined to a commitment to the research and invention necessary to make an imagined world come to life on its own terms. This requires an awareness not only of the field's current state but of its history and original sources, in order to be aware of which elements of the genre have been abused and overused, and know how one might make readers see them as new again. It requires diligence, taste, and craft. It requires, in short, writing as seriously and as well as possible, for attempting to write good epic fantasy is much the same as setting out to explore the wilderness beyond the fields we know with only a tattered scrap of parchment for a guide, its words both a warning and a promise:

Here there be dragons. ▶

Alce Austin lives in Portland, Oregon. He attended Clarion West 2000, which helped spark his interest in literary criticism. This essay originally appeared on Strange Horizons, www.strangehorizons.com.

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Land/Space: An Anthology of Prairie Speculative Fiction,
edited by Candas Jane Dorsey and Judy McCrosky
Edmonton: Tesseract Books, 2002; \$28.95 hc/\$16.95 pb; 256 pages
reviewed by James L. Cambias

Science fiction and fantasy are very anthology-prone fields, perhaps because for so long the heart of both fields lay in the magazines. Most modern sf and fantasy collections are organized by topic—uncommon stories, *Alternate Kennedy*, Sherlock Holmes pastiches, Christmas stories, and a hundred more. This is not just a matter of marketing. It's cool to see how different writers approach a common theme or idea, each playing their various riffs like a good jazz band.

There are a handful of sf anthologies organized by some identifying characteristic of the authors. Jack Dann's *Wandering Stars: An Anthology of Jewish Fantasy and Science Fiction* is one; there are also Sherree Thomas's *Dark Matter* anthology devoted to African-American writers and Nicola Griffith and Stephen Pagel's *Bending the Landscape* series of anthologies devoted to gay and lesbian writers.

Geographic anthologies are more scarce still. David Hartwell and Glenn Grant edited two anthologies of Canadian science fiction, *Northern Stars* and *Northern Suns*, and there is M. Shayne Bell's Utah collection *Washed By a Wave of Wind*. Andy Duncan and F. Brett Cox have edited a forthcoming anthology of Southern stories of the fantastic. But they are definitely a rarity.

This is interestingly different from the situation in more mainstream literature, where just about every state university press has at some point brought out a collection by regional authors, and anthologies like Algonquin Books's annual *Best New Stories of the South* get national distribution and enough commercial success to keep the series going.

Southern writers have established an identity for nearly a century now, ever since H. L. Mencken said mean things about the lack of culture in the South in his essay "The Sahara of the Bozart." That prompted John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren to write *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* and generally start turning Southern writing into a literary juggernaut.

Other regions followed suit, in a whole wave of regionalism that started in the 1930s. J. Frank Dobie turned Western literature from cowboy dime novels into a serious academic pursuit. There are collections of stories by Midwestern writers, Northwestern writers, New England writers—and that's just within the United States.

Candas Jane Dorsey and Judy McCrosky have come up with an unusual new variant on the regional anthology. Instead of focusing on a single place, they have taken a particular landscape as their unifying element—in this case, prairies. *Land/Space* has stories by Canadian writers from prairie provinces, American writers from prairie states, and even some Australian writers. (The tilt is heavily northward: The book is published in Canada, and 24 of the 35 writers represented are Canadian.) In her foreword, McCrosky poses the question "Does living in a similar physical environment overcome the differences between nations and manifest itself in common themes, style, and imagery among writers who share a geography but not a country?"

(Given that, it would have been interesting to add some Argentine or Russian writers to the mix, since both those countries have their own traditions of fiction about grasslands, and neither is part of the greater Anglophone literary world. But for a small-press book supported in part by Canadian arts grants, that just may not have been feasible.)

The chief problem with any regional anthology like this is that at some point the editor has to sit down and write a preface. What to say? If you say "Here are some stories by people who happen to live in the same region" it sounds awfully superficial. So inevitably the compiler has to come up with some generalizations about what makes that region's fiction different from writing generated elsewhere. In *Land/Space*, McCrosky identifies some common features: "huge sweeps of grassland" (naturally), roads, the subtle

beauty of the land, and connections between the people and the land itself.

Whether or not the editor's insights are valid (and in this case they certainly are), it creates an odd sort of mindset in the reader. Instead of focusing on the stories themselves, one starts playing the game of "spot the prairie" in each piece. Roads? Check. Subtle beauty? Check.

Pretty much all the stories in the volume show those features, and some almost read as though the authors were using McCrosky's foreword as a checklist. Nevertheless there are a number of very good stories in this collection, and some of the strongest are also the most prairieified. Holly Phillips's "All the Room in the World" depicts a far future Canadian prairie overrun by refugees from ecological collapse. Carole Nomarhas does a great job of evoking the terror of Australia's vast landscape in "Of Bone and Hide and Dust," and Alexandra Merry Arruin does much the same for the prairie provinces in "Grains of Water, Beads of Dust." The final story, A. M. Dellamona's "River Boy," shows an intrusion of the fantastic into a well-depicted small prairie province town.

Since McCrosky defines prairie fiction, Candas Jane Dorsey's afterword takes a look at the nature of speculative fiction itself. She is dubious about the whole idea of speculative fiction as a "literature of ideas" asserting instead that it is a literature of affect, and often a literature of setting.

In sf, setting is not flat in the conceptual sense. It is intrusive, obtrusive, visible, changeable, critiqueable, and powerfully influential. It is a constant, present, active player in the location of any narrative and the formation of any future.

(This afterword was presented as an essay in *NTSRF* 180 under the title "Farewell to the Literature of Ideas.")

This ties in neatly with the whole prairie theme, and makes a very important point often neglected in discussions of science fiction and fantasy: the importance of setting. This is one reason translations of science fiction to film often fare so badly—the moviemakers treat the setting as something best left to art directors and prop masters, while the writer and director focus on the story and characters. But in sf the characters and what happens to them is sometimes the *least* important element.

Dorsey's implied distinction between idea and setting is something of a false opposition. The idea in an "idea story" is often an idea *about* the setting, from *Ralph 124C41* to Nicola Griffith's *Ammonites*. Even space operas can be summed up as ideas about settings: "What if there was an evil empire ruling over the galaxy?" or "What if there was a planet of scantly-clad barbarians remarkably similar to humans?" Science fiction (and fantasy to a lesser extent) plays with ideas that are usually ideas about settings or themes. That's the very nature of the genre. Ideas about specific protagonists make for a story of character, something notoriously rare in sf.

Land/Space is an interesting experiment, occupying the space in the Venn diagram where "prairie fiction" and "speculative fiction" overlap. Dorsey and McCrosky had to define the boundaries of those two fields in order to figure out where the overlap lies and what belongs in it. One may quibble with exactly where the lines get drawn (sf readers have been quibbling about these matters for a century), but Dorsey and McCrosky have made interesting and insightful choices, both in where to set those boundaries and in the stories that fit within them. The stories they selected are quite good, which is no small achievement for an original anthology with such tight constraints on the pool of contributors. *Land/Space* demonstrates that sf can thrive in prairie soil. ▶

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To Read *The Separation*

continued from page 1

interludes of reflective personal regret. Like Nabokov, Priest doesn't make it easy for the reader to follow his reasoning of cause and effect, or indeed, to know whether the alternate reality is anything more than a long daydream. This vagueness is put forward as a positive thing, to be appreciated, even savored, as in *Ada*.

Which is fine! One should try to appreciate any work of art in the spirit that it's offered.

Well, normally one should. But he warned, this essay is not about *The Separation* as Christopher Priest meant it to be read. A sufficient number of reviewers have done that already, noting the author's skill at many aspects of style and at complex ironies. Rather, I want to interrogate the science-fictional core—his *invented world*.

A Unique Approach

First, a summary. Most of *The Separation* is spent portraying the delicate crossover of cryptic information and clues between a military historian in one world and his alternate self in another. The clues let him piece together two very different outcomes to a rivalry between identical twin brothers, his father and uncle—who together rowed for Britain in the 1936 Olympics, meeting along the way Rudolf Hess, who was Adolf Hitler's second-in-command. Later, one brother becomes an RAF pilot in World War II and the other a pacifist activist who strives to end the fighting between Germany and Britain.

There is much to appreciate here. For example, the protagonist as first views *own world*—led to total victory over Nazism by Winston Churchill—as a strange make-believe story, existing only in a hand-scrawled manuscript, possibly the ravings of a delusional veteran. (A similar device was used by Philip K. Dick in *The Man in the High Castle*.) Through successive hints and discoveries, Priest creates a delicate interweaving of testimony by and about the brothers, each with two variants in diverging worlds.

In one universe, the pilot dies and the pacifist is hurriedly consulted by Churchill's government over how to deal with the sudden and surprising arrival in Scotland of *Reichsführer* Hess. In the

other cosmos, it is the pilot who survived to consult about Hess—and to get the girl. The resulting narrative—operating at multiple levels, from high existential mysticism to political intrigue to low personal jealousy and guilt—can at times be diverting, even moving.

Other reviewers have focused on those aspects, heaping praise on *The Separation* for its character development and wistfully Nabokovian contemplativeness. My role here is to point out something rather basic. Underneath all of the personal sagas and stylistic distractions, a fear of science-fictional worldbuilding merits examination.

While it is always dangerous to claim insights into another writer's mind, it will grow evident that *The Separation* is a Nabokovian projection of desires, with many scores to settle.

We should take a close look at what is being wished for.

Background

In Priest's alternate reality, the divergence breakpoint involves one of the weirdest moments of World War II, when the Nazi second-in-command, Rudolf Hess, attempted a "peace mission" by flying his personal bomber to Scotland in May 1941, in a single-handed effort to end hostilities with Britain before Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Hess took this bizarre and quixotic step for reasons that made perfect sense to him—because he saw no sense in two Aryan peoples squabbling while there were still plenty of inferior races to gang up on.

This was standard Nazi dogma. Hitler himself ranted on about his wish that Britain would just accept his primacy on mainland Eurasia and go elsewhere to enjoy its Empire—which he professed to quite admire. Dividing the world between two Nordic peoples struck him as eminently sensible, even though Britons seemed rather wimpy in their comparatively compassionate treatment of natives.

Hess was acting in Hitler's spirit, though ostensibly against the Führer's orders, when he took off from Norway. The aim of his flight—to make contact with pro-German elements in the British aristocracy—has received considerable attention of late, including revelations and intimations that point toward likely complicity—tacit, perhaps active—by some of those near Edward, the recently abdicated ex-monarch. The immediate objective was to achieve a ceasefire, so that German armies could turn fully east, toward the "Jewish-Bolshevik Menace."

David Brin

What Hess Sought

As things happened in our world, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union—Operation Barbarossa—at first achieved stunning success despite its late start, capturing or eliminating every Soviet army that tried to block the relentless *Wehrmacht*. Autumn rains and then winter snow famously intervened, stopping the Nazi juggernaut short of all three main goals—Leningrad, Moscow, and the southern oil fields. But in their final advance, amid mud and then ice, German divisions actually caught sight of the Kremlin's onion domes. It was that close.

Without the crucial delay caused by British obstinacy in Greece, Libya, Crete, and the Atlantic, Operation Barbarossa would surely have begun many weeks earlier, perhaps as soon as April, 1941. As much two months more in time to pummel the reeling Russians, seizing every city and their entire grain belt, giving them no time to relocate factories; two months more to annihilate the last Russian Army reserves and cut southern supply lines, two months more to perpetrate brutal slaughter in subjugated lands.

Beyond Moscow lay the ideal river defense lines sought by Guderian's war plan and airfields within easy reach of the final Russian Urals redoubts. With two more months to repair railways and consolidate well-supplied winter fronts, Hitler's forces would have settled down to warm Moscow quarters and prepared for a 1942 *coup de grace*.

Nor is that all. In autumn 1941 the Japanese High Command was still wrangling between two factions—admirals wanting to strike south at Dutch Indonesia and generals seeking to strike west into Siberia. In our reality, the admirals barely prevailed, but only after Barbarossa clearly bogged down, convincing Japanese leaders

that there would be no easy linkup in that direction. Hence the timing of their attack on Pearl Harbor.

Only now imagine that Moscow and the Soviet oil fields fell to the *Wehrmacht* by October and that Stalin desperately summoned his Siberian divisions two months earlier. The choice in Tokyo would then have been a no-brainer. On the one hand, strolling into a defenseless Siberian vacuum, surrounding and annihilating Mao Zedong, consolidating North China in a swoop and dividing Eurasia with their Axis ally. On the other hand, the risky gamble of attacking Hawaii, then facing an angry, united America.

Japan would have fallen gleefully upon the Soviet rear.

So it becomes clear why Christopher Priest chose late May 1941 as the earliest possible breakpoint for his peace treaty between Britain and Germany. For Britain to bow her earlier would have brought terms tantamount to surrender. It would also have meant total domination of the Eurasian land mass by fascist empires, very quickly and almost automatically.

So far we are on safe historical footing. Scholars mostly concede that British war-fighting up to May helped save Russia from defeat. What I'd like to question is the widely held assumption—obviously shared by Christopher Priest—that British involvement *after* May 1941 stopped making very much difference. Could the chore of resisting Nazism simply have been handed over—as portrayed in *The Separation*—to a Soviet Union capable of facing Hitler on even terms?

There is a tendency for people to overestimate, by far, the depth of Soviet reserves in late 1941. They had reeled back and regrouped so many times, one imagines it could go on that way forever. But evidence shows that autumn/winter campaign to have been, in fact,

In our world, the Hess mission was a silly debacle that sank into amused derision, with just enough surrounding mist to entice cranky conspiracy fetishists. It was doomed from the start, in part by Churchill's unswerving focus on victory but far more by the dauntless decency of a British people who could see quite clearly how different the Nazis were from any other foe. An overwhelming majority realized that defeating Hitler was worth any price, even their empire. They did their human duty and for this the world owes them, big time.

They had already shown unrivaled courage in the Battle of Britain, the Battle of the Atlantic, early campaigns in North Africa, and that daring, forlorn expedition to help the plucky Greeks defend themselves. All brought home the real cost of standing up to such an enemy. Through 1940, 1941, and well into 1942, these efforts may have seemed futile, as one debacle followed another. But that was only the surface. Underneath each bloody setback, amid the ripples of consequence, Churchillian stubbornness was having an effect. Though unable to defeat Hitler by themselves, the British put up such a tough fight that Hitler had to delay by several months the onset of Operation Barbarossa, the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union.

May 1941

This delay has long been recognized as historically critical. (See sidebar). Any earlier peace between Britain and Germany would have been so disastrous to the Soviets, that it could only lead to your classic "Hitler Victorious" scenario. A scenario Christopher Priest has tried assiduously to avoid.

Instead, to reach his desired outcome, Germany and Russia had to be closely matched. For you see, the foreordained, long-term result in the alternate history of *The Separation* is for the USSR and the Third Reich to grind each other down without any further help or sacrifice from Britain.

So one authorial choice is clear. It had to be Hess.

Only, by delaying a British sell-out truce till May '41, you get a different problem. Because by then, the British people and Churchill had their blood up. All chance of a channel invasion had been quashed. Crete had been a disaster, but Malta held and Rommel's freighters were sinking to the bottom of the Mediterranean, while American

weapons were starting to pile up at the wharves of Suez. Cracking the German military codes gave a huge boost to the morale of those who knew about the triumph of Ultra.

Moreover, Lend-Lease was in full play, and America was ramping up its efforts at a rate whose asymptote would surely climax in joining the war. U.S. soldiers were already fighting U-boats in the Atlantic and dying by the hundreds. President Roosevelt shipped the entire U.S. tank production to the Eighth Army in Egypt, and he started applying every kind of pressure on the Japanese over the horror in China, squeezing their resource base and prodding them toward committing a *casus belli*. And a casus belli was all the American public by then needed.

On the much nearer horizon, the Russians would become allies even sooner (Churchill knew about Barbarossa from Ultra decrypts, well before Hess began his flight). With the prospect of two behemoths soon joining the anti-Nazi corner, why suddenly cave in?

To quit in May '41 would make all those costly earlier oblations seem wasted—not only morally unpalatable but also *politically* suicide to a man like Churchill, who had earlier called for ultimate sacrifice. So why on Earth would he let himself be persuaded by an obvious imbecile like Rudolf Hess, who had been disowned by his own people?

Back up a moment. Hess said he had hoped to land at the estate of the Duke of Hamilton, whom he wrongly believed to be a leader of a "peace party." John Harris, author of a 1999 book, *Hess: The British Conspiracy*, points out how silly that belief was and how suspiciously easily Hess evaded the normally vigilant RAF that night. Let's recall that every German spy in Britain had been captured and was now working for MI5, funneling false information to Berlin. Might this flood of disinformation have included tales of a Peace Party much stronger than it really was? Combine all of this, and a betting man would wager that Hess fell for a trap, a baited lure! A trick pulled by foxes upon wolves—one of many that Churchill's cagey crew laid against the Nazis during those years.

Indeed, isn't that the simplest hypothesis? Instead of a stunning surprise, a stunning *con*. After all, Churchill made great propaganda hay out of the Hess debacle. In our world, it propelled popular support and encouraged him to dig in.

But let's put all of that—and a great deal more—aside. Take it

a very close-run thing. The Siberian divisions that Stalin hurled before the gates of Moscow were his very last trained reserves. There was nothing left.

Now assume a May 1941 peace between Britain and Germany. The very first result?

Release of at least twenty German and twenty Italian divisions, led by Rommel, no longer needed to staff off British forays in Norway, the Balkans, and North Africa. Forty divisions. All right, make it as few as thirty in order to leave a large covering force out west. Thirty divisions heading eastward to overmatch Stalin's last reserve.

Then add more divisions contributed gladly by Vichy in exchange for that puppet government's return to Paris and release of some French POWs. Not just plausible, this outcome is almost automatic, once Hitler need no longer guard his rear against Britain. Indeed, the German occupiers had such a deal on the table, assuming only that the English terriers would stop chivvying their rear. (Vichy sent some troops to the Russian front in *our* world, even without such inducements.)

Now start subtracting from the Soviet side of the ledger. No crucial supplies brought into Murnansk by brave British sailors or overland from British-controlled Iran. (Many Soviet reinforcement brigades were equipped directly from the docks in this way, during the darkest days.) Instead, without Royal Navy opposition, the Italian and German and Vichy fleets are at liberty to flatten Murnansk, Leningrad, and even Vladivostok. So maybe the Japanese would strike west after all.

Why not? There would be no need for Tokyo to strike south and east after resources. Without British flotillas blocking their path, German-escorted officials from the Dutch puppet government would simply sail into Batavia/Djakarta and take over the colonial office in Indonesia without a shot. Very legal and prim. All the oil and rubber, shared between German and Japanese hegemonies, for free.

While this is not absolutely guaranteed, what motive would Britain have to block it? With Churchill deposed by an angry British electorate, is there even a remote chance they'd risk war over minor staff changes in the Dutch Colonial Office? (Especially if British banking interests got a share?) Would the Dutch governors there continue defying occupiers who held their loved ones hostage back home? Again, this hardly qualifies as speculation. What could possibly have prevented it from happening?

With the Royal Navy now neutral, a disgusted America would not lift a finger. Its trade embargo against Japan—now moot—would be dropped in favor of a return to traditional isolationism. China's agony? None of our concern.

Moving on from near-certainty to mere high-plausibility, would not Turkey want a share of the Russian pie? Say, in return for Crimea? With the whole rest of the world piling in, why not?

But wait, there's more! Envision *British* SS volunteer units joining the momentum of the Pan-European anti-Bolshevik crusade, perhaps led by the infamous Oswald Mosley? It happened everywhere else that countries "made peace" with the Nazis. Spain, Norway, and Holland sent divisions.

Am I making this up? All of it was—in fact—part of the plan that Rudolf Hess conveyed when he flew from Norway, though Christopher Priest downplays the incredible specifics. Far from secret, it was open Nazi doctrine.

No wonder Hess risked all in search of a pact with London, that May. It might have all come true... but for continuing, obstinate British heroism. Perhaps it's past time that we note how the harder, more courageous, less cynical and vastly more noble path was the one actually chosen by the people of that small isle, who were indeed offered an indecent though easy way out.

The world needed them, and they came through for us all. ►

off the table.

For it is at this juncture that Christopher Priest envisions a sudden about-face. The stout British lion—defender of Poland, Belgium, France, and Greece—abruptly loses its resolve at the very moment when it is about to gain huge allies, persuaded by the credibility of a parachuting maniac—plus a few lecturing monologues by a former rowing champion.

Oh, but one should not judge an alternate history solely on the likelihood of its breakpoint. Yes, it seems weird for Churchill and Britain to abandon a brave struggle, just when some light could be seen. But let's go along with Priest and imagine such a sudden turnaround. A moral capitulation, followed by prosperous peace, unearned by force of arms.

Is May Too Soon?

The result, as Priest portrays it, is indeed no "Hitler Victorious" scenario. For reasons that will become clear, he still has the Nazis eventually pound themselves down to shreds against the eastern steppe. Later we'll talk about how this fits into Priest's elegant contrivance, an edifice that the author has set up in order to demolish *everybody* who happens to be non-British.

But never mind that for now. *The Separation* starts with this assumption—that continued British involvement made no further important difference. After May 1941, the end result on the eastern front must be the same as in our world. Barbarossa starts late in his universe, as it did in ours. Remember, that's why the breakpoint could be no earlier than May. A delay, thanks to British heroism. Then that heroism can abruptly stop.

Or can't? Will even the two-month delay of Barbarossa be enough to save Russia, if Britain then opts out?

In short, the evidence says no. The Axis had vast resources, troops and material tied up in the West and North Africa. Peace with Britain in May 1941 would have freed up dozens of divisions plus huge numbers of aircraft and ships for the Eastern (and now only) Front. In our reality, the 1941 campaign was extremely close-fought with the Soviets barely holding out; it's hard to see how they would have survived if Britain suddenly let go. Especially if, as a result, Japanese war aims suddenly shifted west.

Let's keep in mind that this was precisely the aim of Rudolf Hess, when he set forth from Norway. (See sidebar for details of "What Hess Sought.")

In any event, every Russian would know that their torment began just days after the Hessian treaty was signed, a stretch of collusion that would make the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact look like the Marshall Plan. If any Russian remained alive, he would think only of vengeance. So Britain would have to join in, *helping* the Nazis, for her own safety's sake.

It all gets pretty bleak for isolated Russia. But springtime for *Lebensraum*.

Reflection

I actually feel grateful to Christopher Priest, for having forced me to ponder all this. I've long felt that historians have missed a core truth about the Second World War. While correcting their earlier neglect of the Russian Front, they may have gone too far the other way, relegating Britain's participation to a side show, a doughty guerrilla campaign, dealing pinpricks that irked the Nazis while they grappled with a behemoth to the east.

How strange that a British author would take this thirty-year-old trend to its ultimate fruition—denying that British courage, cleverness, skill, endurance, and sacrifice mattered, or did much to make a better world. In seeking the absolute opposite of Churchillian triumphalism, Priest creates a spectacular irony that's gone unnoticed so far, in any of the reviews I've seen. In order to set up his Nabokovian wish-fantasy—a British Imperium preserved while others fall into a savage mutual blood bath—he must offer one central excuse, that "we weren't making a difference anyway."

Ironie, and not true. Looking at the facts, one can only conclude that Britain's participation in the war repeatedly saved the USSR, and not only with those early, quixotic delaying actions in Greece, etc. Clearly, she *continued* to aid the Soviets—and the world—decisively for a very long time after May 1941. If you remove resistance by the

Royal Navy from the picture at any point during that year, you effectively hand Eurasia over to the Axis Powers.

This was the explicit thinking that brought Rudolph Hess to Scotland, seeking peace and neutrality from Britain. A mad but eminently practical objective, and one that Christopher Priest spins out in a voluptuous day dream of *what-if*.

Or perhaps "if only . . . ?"

Yet, Things Are Different

To be fair, let me admit that I've gone too far. Again, what Christopher Priest depicts in *The Separation* is not a classic Hitler Victorious scenario. Choosing to ignore nearly all of the factors mentioned above, he instead posits a different result.

Something even more disturbing.

Back to the Novel

Oh, his surface characters, twin brothers at odds over the war, wrangle many pros and cons—while competing over a woman they both love. In fairness, there are those in the novel who speak up for the kind of stubborn resistance-to-evil that we saw in this world, though in voices that are subtly undermined. Priest does not dare to call his alternate reality "better." But an author has many ways to make one side sound more reasonable than another.

In order to recognize the prescriptive nature of *The Separation*, to identify the author's desires, you need only tally up all the interesting differences between Priest's invented world and ours, keeping careful track of who wins and all the scores that get conveniently settled.

A British Empire that was never exhausted or drained by desperate fighting, finishing very much on top.

An America that never came to the rescue, and so never had to be thanked. (A theme that Priest has weighed-in upon elsewhere, frequently and bitterly.)

An "American Century" that never happened, because the United States became embroiled in idiotic Asian land wars that would cripple it, economically and socially, leaving its morale shattered.

Then consider his portrayal of a *softened* Nazism. That is, softened just enough so that the reader can contemplate it not as history's archetype of pure evil, but as just another imperium. Perhaps unpleasant in some ways. But then, who isn't?

And a kinder, gentler Holocaust as, in one inexplicable way, a number of European Jews are bought out from the barbed wire and sent into vague (though still brutally involuntary) exile in the jungles of Madagascar—a bizarre notion that was actually bruited, as a rationalization, by the Nazi leadership before 1940. For subsequent decades it was dismissed as utterly loony, too macabre for serious mention, that is till the plan was given its first modern credence in this book.

Picture it. Not six million, but *twenty* million people, ransomed with gold (who would pay?) and then packed with supplies onto freighters (at least 50,000 trips!) to colonize a steamy idle halfway around the globe? The fiscal and logistical math, alone, made this idea seem maniacal in a far more credulous era.

And yet this peculiar notion is absolutely essential for the moral premise of *The Separation*. Enough Jews must be packed south so that the burning image of Auschwitz—too ghastly to ignore—can simply be written out of history. So that Priest can look mostly past the general reign of terror, with barely a nod to the roaming SS extermination squads who did half the killing as they followed those rolling armies east. As if the same fiercely pragmatic murderers would somehow—because of Hess—have foregone the vast pool of slave labor, or paid the immense cost of relocating millions, when a cosmetic few would suffice. Think Theresienstadt in Madagascar. A Potemkin whitewash.

But never mind plausibility. Priest arm-waves away the Holocaust for important reasons. Only with that softening is it possible for some of his characters to engage in the book's most amusing Priestian rationalization, in which the character with his strongest authorial voice calls Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler morally equivalent.

I've said that Priest doesn't actually glorify the Nazis or give them victory. Again rather vaguely, he maintains that they would still have eventually met their comeuppance on the eastern steppe, even without all the strings and delays inflicted by the British lion, the Churchillian sacrifices that aided Russia in our world.

We've observed at length how unlikely that seems, given the very near thing of 1941 and how many more forces would have converged on Britain without British tenacity. But heck, it's conceivable.

Again, implausibility isn't the issue here. Alternate realities deserve a lot of leeway for the sake of sheer "what-if" adventurousness.

No, the primary objective that Priest achieves in *The Separation*—the core conceit of this daydream—is to make everyone who is not British (and some Brits the author dislikes) pretty much morally equivalent.

By first lifting up the Nazis a bit, and creating his own caricature of a wretchedly stupid and vicious America—one presumably without the wisdom of George Marshall—he then gets to hard both ugly empires against equally ugly Eurasian communist behemoths and thereby grind down *everybody* he dislikes.

Into bits.

Nasty foreign bits, leaving behind—in comfortable neutrality—a genteel, reformed British Empire/Commonwealth, liberated from any further need to sacrifice, ready to get on with truly important business. Refreshing the countryside. Holding book signings. White man's burden. A proper class system, with a touch of labor strife. Bemoaning the weather. Wallowing in some existential angst before tea.

Again, *mea culpa*, any reviewer is on shaky ground when claiming to interpret what an author actually desires. Does Steven Barnes wish that Caucasians had been enslaved by Africans, as he portrayed in *Lion's Blood*? Or does Kim Stanley Robinson wish that all Europeans had died of the Black Death, as in *Years of Rice and Salt*? Did Philip K. Dick desire Allied defeat, because he showed it in *The Man in the High Castle*?

Surely not. The will to toy with reality is strong within true science fiction writers. Not all divergences represent authorial preference.

All I can do is express my opinion while remarking on a rather blatant pattern—one that should be openly discussed—that the most passionate and persuasive pontifications in the book are put into the mouths of characters who are given maximum point-of-view credibility with every authorial trick. And these characters clearly *want* the world Priest creates for them.

Oh, but then there's the escape clause. A hint that the entire scenario in *The Separation* is nothing but a dream. A device that lets Priest say, "I didn't mean it," while making the whole exercise feel like a hollow, pretend meal.

Wolfskin by Juliet Marillier

New York: Tor Books, 2003; \$25.95 hc; 493 pages

reviewed by Michael Cule

I was once, you may not believe it when I tell you, second reserve contestant on an edition of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. It is frustrating enough to sit at home and shout at the screen: "No! Norway, you idiot!" or "Cardinal Richelieu died in 1642!" or whatever it may be but believe me it's even worse to sit in the audience and watch someone, who is only there instead of you because they came a hairsbreadth closer to guessing the population of Orkney than you did to guessing the height of Kinder Scout, take a quarter of an hour to decide which of the two cities in *A Tale of Two Cities* (They edited the dithering down savagely for transmission.)

Similarly, I've never really enjoyed sitting through slasher movies and watching people who ought to know they're in deadly danger (the clue being that several people have already been, slashed, barbed, and tenderized before their eyes) wander unconcerned off into the woods, the attic, the cellar, or wherever the Mad Slasher lurks.

What I'm saying, I suppose, is that I'm a terrible intellectual snob and I don't get any entertainment out of watching stupid people suffer.

This is a problem then when I read a book with a very stupid main character. I know I'm supposed to like him for his other qualities, his courage, his basic decency, his determination. But as he makes the same mistake over and over, I'm shouting at him: "No, no, you idiot! Didn't you learn last time! Have you no sense of pattern recognition!"

The book before me at the moment is about the settlement of the Orkney Islands by the Norse. The central character is Eyvind, a

If Phil Dick wanted us to dread a world of Hitler Victorious, if Kim Stanley Robinson asked us to contemplate other possible social fruits in *The Years of Rice and Salt*, if Steven Barnes aimed to engender reversal sympathy with the enslaved in *Lion's Blood*, then what is the point of Priest's Hessian peace?

There is no escape clause. For all of its other merits and faults, the creepiest thing about *The Separation* is its prescriptive nature. Priest's alternate reality is no *Gedankenexperiment* or warning but the way the world ought to be—a parallel universe redolent of racial bigotry and craven rationalization—one in which a different Britain is rewarded for cowering away from a noble fight that saved civilization.

A universe that Priest finds preferable to *this* one, where Winston Churchill had the effrontery to call for the best that a nation could put forward, then all that it could bear, and then called for more. This one where a brave, decent folk answered that idealistic summons, resisting overwhelming odds, sacrificing blood, sweat, their sons, and their empire, holding a thin line for the sake of Poles, Frenchmen, Greeks, Chinese, Russians, Jews, Yanks, and various Wogs.

By all means, let us daydream a world wherein historical circumstances *don't* require that any decent Briton feel reciprocal gratitude toward *Americans* (shudder!) for coming in puissant force when that thin line was about to buckle, then helping topple the worst evil that humanity ever produced. A world whose leadership never moved—for better or worse—from London across the sea to *Washington and Hollywood*, those eastern and western capitals of a brash, often grating Pax Americana.

How bloody irritating. Surely, history made a mistake. Alas, this world of ours is not ideal for professional cynics. There's too much naive hope in it. Too many genuine though-flawed good guys fought to save us all from bona fide monsters.

But Priest can dream. He is welcome to do so.

It's a free country, after all. ▶

Dread Brn lives in Eucinitas, California. Author's Note: This review was first written in early 2003, before the jury for the Arthur C. Clarke Award decided to short-list both The Separation and my novel Kill People. It seemed inappropriate to submit this critique for publication while those two works were in competition. Now that a decent interval has passed, I can offer it in the context that it was first written—as one reader's reaction.

Wolfskin, a berserk warrior devoted to Thor and in the service of a nobleman. We follow Eyvind from childhood and watch as he grows up into a warrior. He's decent, brave, determined, but far from the brightest intellectual light in Scandinavia.

In his youth he is given the care of Sommerled, a young noble, an intellectual younger son who feels neglected and abused by everybody. And most unwisely Eyvind swears blood-brotherhood with young Sommerled. We know it is unwise because the author is kind enough to have a hard tell a tale in the very first chapter in which swearing oaths of eternal loyalty and friendship turns out very badly indeed.

The rest of the book is spent working out that prefiguring and damned tedious it got indeed. The story is two thirds over before a light comes on in Eyvind's brain, and he starts to do something about the mess he's allowed to go on and even contributed to. Sommerled turned out to be a villain of the blackest stripe, you will be as surprised as I was to hear. And every time Sommerled got away with a new piece of skullduggery, I was gritting my teeth and snarling at our hero to pull his finger out.

The irritation I felt wasn't helped by the fact that the action only really got going when Sommerled's brother left Norway to set up his colony in the Orkneys and the author could introduce us to the islands (which she clearly loves) and her invented pseudo-Finnish culture for the original inhabitants. And this was after about forty percent of the book was already done. Marillier seemed determined to give us the

whole story of Eiyind and Sommerled "from egg to nuts," but I would have advised beginning *in media res* and giving us a little more of the Island Folk.

And although I cannot fault the author's research (not knowing enough about either Vikings or Picts) I must say that occasionally her writing drops into a plonking and clichéd tone that is to be regretted: "It was a sight to wring the stoutest heart, to pale the rosiest cheek."

This may have done for a Victorian melodrama but not for a description of an act of atrocity, the murder of a native settlement by the intruding Vikings and their Wolfskins. I cannot love a book, whatever it's other virtues, that at this late date contains a sentence like that. ▶

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Fudoki by Kij Johnson

New York: Tor Books, 2003; \$25.95 hc; 320 pages

reviewed by Joe Sutliff Sanders

Fudoki is the follow-up novel—I hesitate to call it a sequel—to Kij Johnson's breathtaking debut novel, *The Fox Woman*, which won the Crawford award for best first fantasy novel. Johnson lavished details of feudal Japanese culture on the book, filling it not only with a powerfully emotional throughline but also the kind of convincing milieu so necessary to good fantasy. The characters loved and worked their magic in a world as tangibly real to us as it was to them.

So what's left to say about this setting? Why return to the site of such success with a second novel? Why does Johnson risk the victory earned in the first novel on another story about the boundaries between animals and human beings in medieval Japan? Evidently because she discovered she could do it even better.

Harume is an old woman. There is something in her chest that is taking up the space to which her lungs are entitled, and that something is growing. Harume is the half-sister of one emperor—a kind man she remembers for the pet mice he gave her and the unexpected freedoms he allowed—the aunt of another, and now the aged and dispensable great aunt of yet another. As she waits for death, she empties the trunks of clothes, old love letters, and empty notebooks that she has accumulated through her long life. Taking one of the notebooks one day, she begins to fill it with the story of her life: a petted, wealthy woman whose past is filled with short-term lovers and family intrigue. But this is no simple memoir; as she writes, Harume grows. She realizes how important were the small kindnesses of this friend or that, she recognizes the patterns of blind obedience in her past and the stories around her, and for the first time she realizes the richness of the lives of the servants whom she has taken for granted for so long.

As she writes her own story, she intersperses reflections on her life with a fictional story of a cat. This tortoiseshell cat, later named Kagaya-hime, is little more than a kitten when her home—an abandoned shack somewhere in the great city—burns to the ground. All the cats, geese, mice, and people in this section of town are destroyed, most of them hungrily. She leaves her once-home in search of a new one, but as she travels, the reader discovers that the most grievous loss Kagaya-hime has experienced is not anything material but an intangible web only known to cats: She has lost her *fudoki*, the story of her history, of the cats before her, of the social space rich with other lives and barely remembered names she has always inhabited. She finds another group of cats with whom to live, but the longer she stays where the more tenuous her hold on her previous *fudoki* becomes. She has her own body, but she has no name and no place in which to live the life attached to that name.

The tortoiseshell cat flees the city and starts a journey that will take her to the northern tip of Japan's main island. She hears the voices of spirits talking to her, she steals what she needs to survive, and she walks at her own pace, sleeping where she can. One morning, she awakens to find herself in the body of a human being. She looks human, she speaks Japanese, and she is clothed as a human woman might be. She is the only one who remembers that she was once a cat. She continues her journey, since she still has no home and no story, fighting off bandits along the way as well as the much more dangerous loneliness that aches in her heart. She becomes a part of great events, nearly joins a family who love her very much, and buries hard-earned friends. But none of this will mean anything to her if she is not able to find a replacement for her *fudoki*. And as her story progresses, it begins to dominate that of the woman who we thought was writing it.

Although *The Fox Woman* had a surprisingly mature tone and confident style, *Fudoki* is yet more mature and confident. The structure of the novel, for example, is much more challenging than that of the first, though both novels use parallel stories of two females. Here, the parallel narratives seem only tentatively related at first, but as they progress, they come to overlap in fascinating ways. Whereas the story of the cat is at first clearly distinct from that of the woman, the cat's experiences actually shape the woman's, joining spatially, then thematically, and finally epically. The structure is well-chosen for the story, and the slow power of the more mundane story rises to meet that of the fantastic story.

One of the reasons the structure works so well is that it—like nearly every other element of the narrative—works hand-in-hand with the novel's theme of the importance of stories. With such a wandering tale (it is, after all, a bizarre sort of picaresque novel), not to mention the surfeit of detail I'll get to below, one would expect bits of different themes to surface here and there, but Johnson weaves in tremendous thematic unity throughout the book. Characters who float (some of them literally) in for no more than a scene are just as true to the novel's theme as are Harume and Kagaya-hime themselves. The empty notebooks on which Harume writes both stories are just as emblematic of the importance of story as are the robes from Harume's childhood. The unity on which Johnson insists throughout the story is impressively sweeping.

Anyone willing to take the time to wander with the characters down Kagaya-hime's road and through Harume's history will enjoy this book, but aficionados of fantasy will find it especially meaningful. Like most of the best of fantasy, this novel takes its precious time getting to the end, and if you're the kind of reader who threw down *The Lord of the Rings* because you thought you'd vomit if Tolkien described one more landscape, let me warn you away right now. But if you're willing to descend into this imagined world and watch a skilled author build it around you not by lamp but by incense, you'll have a wonderful time experiencing Johnson's world.

Even more important to aficionados, though, is the fact that this novel isn't just fantasy in genre, it's fantasy in aim. It's a novel about fantasy, or at least an endorsement of the ideology of fantasy. As in the previous novel, it is one's story that makes reality, not the other way around. But in this novel, there is a reality—Harume's—competing with the fantasy—Kagaya-hime's—for dominance, and the dream wins out. Johnson (or, I might more accurately say, Harume, since she is the one writing both stories) floods the novel with details of cat life, court life, feudal warfare, shrines on the side of the road, forgotten gods, half-remembered childhood secrets, and the very feel of robes on our shoulders. The result is a textured, believable world, even though we know not to believe it.

But what I'm talking about is more profound than just skill with detail. This novel isn't just fantasy, it's dangerous fantasy. Colendene would have us believe that we can protect ourselves from fantasy by remembering that we gave up the right to disbelieve it, but for Johnson that safeguard is invalid. Harume is writing the story of the cat, but then the story of the cat begins to write her. And the reader in our world is no safer, either, when characters we recognize from *The Fox Woman* begin to show up in Harume's writings. Further, if the history of Japan Harume stumbles upon is right, it's actually the stories *animals* tell one another that shape our reality. Did the Osa Hitachi family, a tremendously powerful family in northern Japan,

exist before a woman (one whom a fox imagined) escaped from a crumbling dream and found her way north. If so, why did that family immediately recognize her as one of its own? If not, how is it that the family already had a place at court, servants, rivalries? Reality is a very tenuous commodity in this novel, one constantly threatened—and as far as I can tell, defeated—by fantasy.

There is really very little that I can say against this book. I do wish the copyediting had been more careful, since there are too many comma errors to count, and every one of them frustrated me. I did at times wish I could get away from Harueme's story and back to the story of the tortoiseshell cat, but that was at the beginning of the novel, and it wasn't long before I settled into both tales. There are moments when the details feel superfluous, as though Johnson were trying to

make us share the work of her laborious research, but in the end I'm hesitant to level that critique, since the rest of the novel is so well unified. The rest of the novel earns my trust, so I'm willing to wait for a later reading, when I can see how these details fit in.

This second novel is a resounding success, and as nervous as I was that she had worked this ground pretty thoroughly in her first novel, Johnson continues to challenge herself such that I have no doubt another book in this series would be just as fresh. *Fudoko* is a powerful fantasy that Johnson infuses with a deep love for her characters and setting, a love so rich we can't help but get caught up in it. It's a pleasure to be part of this *fudoko*. ▶

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City of Pearl by Karen Traviss

New York: Eos/Harper Collins, 2004; \$6.99 pb; 400 pages

reviewed by Farah Mendlesohn

It is a truism that modern British sf is to the left of center, but this obscures the variety and complexity of the UK political spectrum. From Karen Traviss, a new British writer, we have another version of the UK left, this time green radicalism and anti-corporatism.

City of Pearl, the first in a trilogy but intensely satisfying as a standalone novel, opens when Superintendent Shan is persuaded to give up her much-desired retirement in order to check on the welfare of a colony that has defied expectations: It has survived. Shan, an officer of EnHax, a body that supervises environmental health in businesses and space stations, can close down a polluting company with just a word and keeps the world safe from eco-terrorism. EnHax has approximately the power of the FBI or the UK customs service. But although still in the service of EnHax, Shan no longer believes that the eco-terrorists are the real threat. She carries with her tomato seeds—unplanted, unowned—that are both her personal security blanket and a silent protest against the corporate takeover of the world's agriculture by big business.

All of this is context, the material that Shan takes with her. *City of Pearl* is a planetary colonization and first contact novel, a rare beast these days when fashions in science fiction are either for nearfuture sf or for space opera in which we turn out to be the only aliens out there. It is also a very effective consideration of the practicalities of colonization, which makes it rare indeed. Traviss seems to be writing in the tradition of C. J. Cherryh, although her prose is more user-friendly, with perhaps a hint of Judith Moffet's gentle deconstruction of the apparently obvious and the moral rigor and curiosity of Brian Stableford.

Shan arrives to find that the colony has survived only because the local alien peacekeepers have supported its plantation. The peacekeepers are not the native species, and the indigenous sapient, as water dwellers, are incredibly vulnerable to the consequences of land invasion. Shan has to deal with the demands of the "payload"—a collection of scientists; a pregnant second-in-command; the requirements of the original colony; and the absolute rules laid down by the West'har, the peacekeeper species represented by a lone male, Aras. In addition, somewhere in Shan's hindbrain is a buried mission, one which will only become clear in the right time and place.

The investigative party has walked into the middle of no-man's-land. Constantine 2 is disputed territory, and lurking in the background are the Issenji, a fast-breeding race of spiderish sort of people. The Issenji colonized CS2 until the West'har responded to the distress of the indigenous Bezeri and wiped the Issenji from the face of the land. Shan, vegetarian, keen on primate rights, etc., etc., immediately aligns with the West'har, but the scientists are more ambiguous. This could have turned into an anti-science rant, but instead Traviss asks us to think how we get "there" from "here." The scientists' arguments, she points out, may sound very different from those of the Christian colonists but in fact their underpinnings are the same. The willingness of the scientists to assume that the interests of human beings automatically have primacy ensures that "Reason" becomes simply another word for "Faith."

What makes *City of Pearl* such a good read is its unsentimentality

and its clear-sightedness. Traviss refuses the great cliché of green sf: inherent empathy or special bonding. When genetic memory crops up, it is a characteristic of the most eco-rapacious of the four alien species we meet. Genetic memory does not produce greater empathy, merely greater solipsism. This is an even neater trick, because it is empathy that motivates Shan to make decisions that appear cold-hearted.

Traviss has made a number of decisions that help her to convey her message: To begin with, there are two major female characters. The presence of Lieutenant Lindsay as the second-in-command ensures that not every decision has to be a feminist issue; for those of us interested in such things, we can enjoy the sense of different feminisms, with different agendas playing out. It also undercuts the Amazon warrior image that would otherwise dog Shan and that (ironically) the alien Aras cannot help but try to force upon her.

Aras's position is permitted complexity. Like Shan's, his empathy is practical; he understands that it is, in and of itself, not a good basis for action. His own emotional position is shaped by his male status in the gently patriarchal culture of Constantine, which conflicts with his male status in the matriarchal society of the West'har. An envoy far from home, he is in the unusual position of representing the less influential aspect of his species. And the Other that he represents is multifaceted. The West'har are on one level all that a conscientious Green would want. In addition to their insistence that all animals are persons (there is a very cute scene with two lab rats), they are ascetics: Possessions are valued only if they are useful, even more if they have multiple uses. But they are not immune to the desirable object: Aras (and I) salivate over Shan's Swiss, a PDA and Swiss army knife combined in one neat, handy package. In the absence of possessions, skills become status indicators, and the acknowledgement of such vital for good manners.

Under Shan's rules the scientists of the explorer ship *Thelus* get increasingly frustrated, and one of them commits a crime that once again underscores the degree to which Reason on its own is misguided, and empathy can so easily be circumvented. Shan's actions may give us pause for thought: They are a challenge to the easy superiority of colonialism. As with many other aspects of this novel, we are left with questions rather than answers. By the time the warship *Atreus* the contact party's future, the rifts between various factions are visible. Shan has to deal with knowledge that the government she serves no longer exists and that governments have themselves become payload in corporate projects. Inevitably, a corporatist government looking for new markets and new areas to explore and exploit will have much in common with the Issenji, at least until the two parties come into territorial conflict. This is the point at which those of us reluctant to blame corporations for all our problems might wince, but Traviss has been careful: The corporations represent us. They are the outgrowth of an inquisitive and acquisitive spirit. So while the reader may disagree with Traviss, it is as part of an argument: There have been no sentimental short cuts. ▶

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Does Science Fiction Have to Be About the Present?

In articles and interviews which I've ruthlessly recycled as talks at sf conventions, I've put forward a by-no-means original thesis that sf can be more illuminating about the time of its writing than about that of its imagined future. In an interview or Q&A session at Swcon 2003, Alastair Reynolds pointed out that while there may be some truth in this, there are a great number of stories that aren't—even unconsciously—about the present, but quite straightforward and conscientious attempts to imagine what the real future might be like. He mentioned Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars*.

Good point, I thought, and stole it at once. It was about time I came up with another topic for sf convention talks. Especially as the next one I was due to give was at P-Con in Dublin, and too many people there might well have heard me rambling on about sf as contemporary-reference before. (As it happened, I didn't have to give a talk, because Charlie Stross interviewed me instead.)

Besides, that whole argument gets uncomfortably close to a capitulation to the oft-heard claim (which deserves to be known as the Atwood Defense) that what is really interesting and important about sf is just its contemporary reference; that some novel that might superficially *appear* to be (because it's, say, set in the future after a genetically engineered plague has wiped out most of the human race) isn't *really* sf but satire, and really about the present, and not related to that vulgar stuff about rockets and rayguns and talking squids in outer space, and therefore may deserve serious consideration and can be safely opened without risk of releasing *alien germs* to which normal Earth readers have no natural immunity and that could sweep through the entire literary community and all die, oh, the embarrassment.

So, with space helmets on, brass bras brightly polished, and phasers set to stun, let's boldly go in search of sf that really is about the future and whose contemporary reference is reduced to as close to a trace element as humanly possible.

Interestingly enough, the division between what I'll boldly call pure sf and sf-as-satire cuts across, rather than between, a lot of the themes and tropes and subject areas of sf. The most obvious example is stories set in the far future. Clarke's *The City and the Stars*, already mentioned, or Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* are undoubtedly novels which, while inevitably of their time, are not fundamentally interested in or secretly about their time. They are about the far future of humanity and the universe. Michael Moorcock's "Dancers at the End of Time" stories, however, aren't. They are about an opaque, irresponsible decadence, about ennui, about *fin de siècle*, rather than the literal end of time.

A like distinction can be made between (almost) entire bodies of work that are otherwise closely affiliated: contrast, for example, that of William Gibson with that of Bruce Sterling; or J. G. Ballard with Keith Roberts. In Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, anarcho-capitalism is a satirical device; in most of the work of Vernor Vinge, it's a serious thought experiment. Many more examples could be given and could be argued over (as I'm sure these could be).

For now, though, I want to raise the possibility that the (British) New Wave might be the source of all that was wrong with British sf for thirty years. What was good in the New Wave was the literary quality of some of its writing, and the exacting quality—and polemical verve—of most of its criticism. What was wrong with it was its content. It marked a turn from rationality to irrationality, from outer space to inner, from exploring the universe to inspecting navel fluff, and from popularity to respectability. Yes, 90% of traditional sf was crap. 90% of New Wave sf was crap, and boring, miserabilist, depressing crap at

that. It was an abandonment of everything that justifies sf as a genre, in favor of what is acceptable to mundanes.

What is it that distinguishes, and justifies, sf as a genre?

For thousands of years, people have been huddled around the campfire, telling stories. The stories were about what went on around the campfire (who was sleeping with whom, who had become king and who had plotted to depose him, etc.) and about the figures that were seen in the cautions distorted human shadows that the campfire projected onto the surrounding darkness: gods and demons, ghosts and monsters.

Then, some time around the seventeenth century, the sun came up.

Nature, and Nature's laws, lay hid in night.

God said "Let Newton be!" and all was light.

Science fiction is the stories we tell about the surrounding landscape that then became visible, the world seen in Newton's light. As Swedish critic John-Henri Holmberg has said, it's the literary expression of the Enlightenment.

It's often not a very *good* literary expression. I'm not defending cardboard characters, clunky plots, chunky exposition, or any other literary sins of sf. What I want to take issue with is the criterion of judging sf by its degree of closeness to "realistic" or "fantastic" literature, the literature of the campfire and the dark.

One of the most insidious ways of doing that is to privilege sf that deals imaginatively with social and political issues. Speculative political fancies have been respectable since Plato, who is more or less the Form of Respectability in the Western canon. Thomas More could write an approving speculative fiction about communism and remain respectable, not only canon but canonized. The most respectable work of recent sf is very likely Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. To outflank any unwanted agreement, let me say right away that this isn't because it's feminist, because it isn't—it's Mills & Boon monogamist to the bone, as well as subtly homophobic and biological-sexualist—nor is it because it's communist or anarchist. James P. Hogan gave a much more attractive and indeed more plausible depiction of a communist anarchy in *Voyage From Yesterday*, and I don't see that book on academic sf courses.

No, *The Dispossessed* is respectable because it's an sf book that people with no interest in sf can read comfortably. Its sole real sf content, the theory of the ansible, can whizz right over their heads. It might as well be talking about radio. The real focus of interest is all the cozy familiar campfire stuff about the Individual versus Society, and Society versus Society, which plugs it neatly into the Great Tradition. In short, it's sf for people who don't like sf.

Sf isn't fundamentally about that. Getting that right is good, don't get me wrong. Do for heaven's sake have some understanding of human beings before writing about them, at least to the extent that you do write about them. But what sf is fundamentally about is not the Individual versus Society, or Society versus Society, but humanity in the universe.

Sf needn't thereby lose in human relevance and universality, because the situation it posits is both objectively true and universal to the human being as a knowing subject confronting a knowable object. If sf about that is despised and rejected, rather than critiqued and improved *in terms of its own progress*, then both the Individual and Society are, in the long run, in deeper shit than any dystopia.

And that, comrades, is the real social relevance of sf. ►

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Justin Wescoat Sanders
An Interview with Orson Scott Card

[This interview was conducted by phone on November 10, 2003, in conjunction with the release of *The Crystal City*, the sixth novel in Card's *The Tales of Alvin Maker* series.—The Eds.]

JWS: How was revisiting Alvin Maker this time around?

OSC: It's always fun, because it's a series about American history, where I get to really soup up and change history to clarify what I think it means. I've allowed myself to get into some digressions along the way, and a couple of the books—while they're still integral to the ideas of the Alvin Maker series and the characters, and I think they're good books—they didn't move the plot towards the inevitable conclusion. This one is back on that track and leading up to the very final volume, *Master Alvin*.

JWS: Did you have a seven-part series in mind for Alvin Maker from the beginning?

OSC: I had a three-part series in mind, and *Crystal City* (the sixth book) is book two. It took me five books to get through as much story as I had originally planned for book one. But I did the book two story in this volume, and the book three story will be in the seventh and final book, so it's not so out of hand that it'll never end. It's not like I had some gypsy tell me that I would die as soon as this series was completed, so I've been stretching it out. It had an ending in mind from the beginning. It ends the way all fantasy series end: when the hero is dead or gone.

JWS: Were your other book series, like *The Homecoming* quintet, and the Ender books, planned in a similar fashion? Or were they handled more on a book-by-book basis?

OSC: *The Homecoming* was absolutely a five-book series in the contract, completed as a five-book series. It's really one long story. The Ender books [had] no such plan, ever. Even the second [Ender-based] series, the *Shadow* books, that was meant to be one book about Bean, and it kind of got out of hand. Now it's going to end up as four books by the time it's done. When you get into a book and find that the characters are really interesting and you know that you have the luxury of sprawling across a volume or two, then it's really easy to say, "Well, I won't try to resolve *this* thread. I'll just resolve *that*, and bring *this* book to a close," and then you end up with a lot of threads. I don't think Robert Jordan's original plan was for 112 volumes, but that seems where his series is headed. These things grow. As long as they stay interesting the readers don't seem to mind.

JWS: After the *Shadow of the Hegemon* series is over, do you think the Ender books will be finished?

OSC: Well, no. I have one more book under contract that starts at the end of *Children of the Mind* (the fourth and final book in the *Ender's Game* series) and combines the story elements that will be left from the *Shadow* books with the story elements from the [Ender's *Game*] books, and in combination they'll bring the last dangling questions to an end. Tidiness, you know? I'm 52; it's about time I did that.

JWS: I've read you're a huge fan of history and historical literature. To me historical novels are novels about the past, and science fiction novels are novels about the future.

OSC: Science fiction is a little broader than that. It's about human history *contrary* to what happened. That includes the future, alternate pasts, and alternate presents that are not like the present that we know. There are those that claim the *Alvin Maker* books aren't fantasy books at all. They're just an alternate past with different rules of science. In historical fiction you're tied to what actually happened in an era, and readers can complain if you get it wrong. With an alternate history how can you complain? You've already said you're fiddling with history and you're not doing it the way it actually happened, so no room for complaints, shut up, go home. [Laughs.] Just teasing. If you quote it that way it'll sound like I'm a jerk. You have to quote it with a laugh.

JWS: Okay. I promise I'll put a little bracket in there.

OSC: Laughing maniacally. That'll work.

JWS: Do you feel the sci-fi genre in general gets the respect it deserves from the literary community?

OSC: It gets the respect that will help it—meaning none. Respect from the literary community means they've found a way to

co-opt you and make it so your literature can only be understood if it's explained to you by a professor. And that's the last thing science fiction needs. Science fiction is between the author and the community of readers. And that gives us enormous liberty. We've been able to reinvent a lot of the ways fiction is even used. The literary revolution that was due after modernism was not post-modernism, that was just more of the same with different theories behind it so you can write a whole new set of dissertations. The real revolution was science fiction. We transformed the way [science fiction] was experienced by the audience, and in a hundred years that will be what the literature of the second half of the twentieth century is. The great science fiction novels will be remembered as the pivotal, innovative works that transformed our society, starting with *Lord of the Rings*, which is not science fiction of course, it's fantasy. But continuing with Asimov's *Foundation* Trilogy, with Bradbury, and the many novels of Heinlein—those really established the norms of science fiction, and on from there. Do we want the respect from the literary community? Well, it's always nice to have respect. It'd be cool to be getting the prizes. But not if the price that we would have to pay would be to write stuff that was unreadable and self-important and unimportant as, say, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, which is an embarrassing book, and it won the National Book Award. There's stuff in there that any elementary writing class would be able to say, "You know, this doesn't make any sense, Mr. Franzen. This is called bad writing," and it wins the award. Why? I'm really not sure. I think it's because it's a very adolescent diatribe against parents and family, and that always finds a ready response among the academic literary community. They sort of have a permanent revolution the way the Soviet Union did for 75 years. The older they get the less revolutionary they really are, but boy they sure talk as if they were the experimental revolutionary guys. It's kind of funny. Anyway.

JWS: Do you feel this way about a lot of so-called "literary" fiction?

OSC: Oh there's some that's absolutely wonderful. Literary fiction is like every other genre: It's written to please the audience it's written for. And there are good ones and bad ones, more bad than good like every other genre. But the readers of literary fiction are entitled to have their literature like everybody else, they're just not entitled to claim that it's the only literature and all the other stuff is trash. That's just elitist silliness.

JWS: You've done straight-up contemporary fiction. . . .

OSC: Well, it always has to have a horror or fantasy bent or nobody will talk to me about it because a straight literary novel for me, what's the market?

JWS: Do you have aspirations of writing a more straight literary book like, say, Richard Russo, or hell, Jonathan Franzen?

OSC: I have a masters in literature. I know all the rules. I could write that kind of thing any time I wanted to, and have. I have several stories that definitely fall into that category, and I've come close to it with contemporary fantasies like *Last Boys* and *Homebody* and *Enchantment*, as weird as that book is. But I'm also feeding a family, and so it's better to spend my time on things that have a larger audience. But if I had a compelling story to tell that I felt really urgent about, I'd write it. And I have some wonderful publishers who are very open to whatever I bring them, so I have no doubts that if I wanted to write totally out of genre that I would be able to get it published and that it would be able to find whatever audience it could find. But I still have stories to tell in science fiction that I haven't finished yet, so I'll wrap those up and we'll see how many years of life I have left.

JWS: Are you a big film fan?

OSC: I am. I care very much about film. It's the premiere art form of our time. When somebody wants to praise a book, or anything, their thought is, "Oh that was so good it ought to be made into a movie," but nobody ever says, "Wow, that movie was so good; it oughta be made into an epic poem." It isn't gonna happen. The premiere American art form is film, and I'm an American. I watch movies to see what's happening in our culture.

JWS: One of your film credits on the Internet Movie Database is as

the "insults writer" for *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) video game. Care to comment?

OSC: That's an odd credit, but it's a terrific [computer] game. I was consulting for LucasFilms Games at that time, and one of the things that Ron Gilbert wanted was something that, instead of being about the fighting, was about the insults that the hero and the villain hurl at each other during the fight. You needed to learn retorts for insults that are hurled at you, so I wrote the pairs and triplets of insults that are used in combat, and as you learn one and hear one it becomes available to you. It was a lot of fun, a great idea of Ron Gilbert's, and I'm very proud of the ridiculous insults I came up with. The funny thing is, I was in Israel recently at a sci-fi convention there, and I got more attention there for the insult writing for *Monkey Island* than I've ever got anywhere in the United States. There were even some actors who, in a hip, public event out on the plaza, acted out one of the insult duels. It was really funny.

JWS: Can you rattle off any of the insults?

OSC: Oh, I can't remember a single one. I wrote those 15 years ago. I can't even remember what I wrote yesterday.

JWS: Your religious beliefs have never been kept secret. I've always wondered how the Mormon church has received your work, which though always fair and balanced regarding ethical dilemmas and ideas, definitely presents skeptical and contrary views regarding organized religion.

OSC: Let's just say there are Mormons who think I'm the devil and there are Mormons who think I'm terrific, and that's just the way it goes. But the official church leaves artists alone; they're not terribly

concerned about what artists or writers do, as long as we're not attacking the church. If we're attacking the church, then that's an entirely different matter. They don't punish you, it's not like they go and burn down your house. But you know, if you're attacking the Mormon Church, there's a point where you shouldn't be allowed to call yourself a Mormon anymore. Every now and then there are Mormons excommunicated for that sort of thing, but since I'm a believing, practicing, loyal member of the church, there's no quarrel. We get along great. Most [Mormons] are American, and they love freedom as much as anyone else. They don't want to control what other people do. But in terms of balancing my religion with my writing—I really do make an effort not to have any conscious element of my personal religious beliefs in my fiction, mostly because it would be completely ineffective. If I started turning my fiction into traps to convert people to my views—not just on religion but on politics or anything else—it would become really ineffective and it would start shrinking my audience down to those who already agree with me. I'd much rather trust that my unconscious mind will bring what I really believe at the deepest level, not just what I believe that I believe, but beliefs so deep that I don't notice them. Those are gonna show up in my fiction without any effort on my part at all, so I just trust those, and hope that's something valuable. What I really do is ask readers to devote part of their memory to my stories, and my job is to come up with stories that will resonate and reveal important truths. I'm never going to find that by writing to a plan. When I have something political that I want to say, I put it on my ormeys.com web site.

JWS: I just read *Xenocide* for the third time.

David Langford Random Reading 7

James Barclay, *Shadowheart* (2003): More sword-and-sorcery in the "Raven" sequence, specializing in utterly impossible assaults, pursuits, and defenses against odds so staggeringly overwhelming that our rough, tough mercenary heroes can be saved only by the ultimate, godlike power of the Author himself. On Discworld, for comic effect, million-to-one chances come off nine times out of ten; in Barclayworld, rather more often. But it moves fast and reads pretty well.

Stephen Baxter, *Concurrence* (2003): So this is why Mr. Baxter has been going on about hive minds of late. In part it's a carefully researched historical novel about a tough woman surviving—not easily—the final collapse of Roman imperial influence in Britain, getting involved at some digressive length with a would-be savior of Britain called Artorius, and eventually escaping to Rome itself, there to found a community meant to preserve her bloodline and household gods through present and future turbulence. The twenty-first-century strand slowly reveals how the rules she instinctively formulated for this endave have led to the emergent phenomenon of a human hive mind. Certain associated physiological changes are a bit much to swallow as the result of just sixteen centuries, a mere evolutionary eyblink; there is much urgent handwaving in this area. Other stuff doesn't quite seem part of the same novel. In particular, early forebodings of galactic events which suggest a link to the Xeelee series and a late flash-forward into far-future of with similar implications, both rather tending to detract from the subtler creepiness of the present-day narrative but maybe necessary to the intended trilogy. Relevant John Wyndham story: "Consider Her Ways." It's always good to see Baxter grappling—intelligently as always—with a Great Big Idea.

M.A. Foster, *The Morphodite* (1981), if somewhat in the vein of Jack Vance, though with the exotic colors and vocabulary partly muted. It is entirely Vancean that an oilbeat world's favorite game should prove to be a ramified, status-obsessed, and extensively footnoted version of Tag. Foster offers an interesting approach to the house-of-cards planetary society so common in early and middle Vance, waiting to be toppled by the right push: a status-obsessed government, a underground movement that favors change, and

secret outside observers whose principles of noninterference have been subverted into tacit propping-up of that status. The Morphodite is an engineered assassin whose unlikely special talent is to identify the unsung key person whose death will make a movement or an entire society fall apart, to perform the kill, and to disappear *via* genetic auto-reprogramming that transforms him/her into a new person of opposite sex. The choice of victim is logical, and the consequences neatly worked out. Less plausible is the elaborately daff play whereby this dangerous wild card is created by the local equivalent of the Ministry of Love—here called The Mask Factory, another little homage to Vance!—and released with the underground's approval to do the underground's work. The Mask Factory secretly assumes that the Morphodite's "programming" is flawed and will therefore bring disaster to the rebels. Which is also the end result of unflawed performance: When serious upheaval begins, there's no place left for a faction whose only goal was to initiate change. A good old-fashioned sf read.

John Fuller, *The Adventures of Speedfall* (1985): Short stories of donnish humor with a university setting, rather in the fantastical manner of Michael Innes. Includes some flirtations with genre: a credulity-defying murder mystery; a ghost story that introduces an unusual specter and then stops dead; an sf oddity featuring a biological equivalent of Kurt Vonnegut's *ice-nine* (or nanotechnology's "gray goo" fear) that most implausibly multiplies unchecked in the absence of nutrients or visible energy input. Amusing, stylish pillow.

Michael Gerber, *Barry Trotter and the Unnecessary Sequel* (2003): Oh dear. Not in fact as dire as *Barry Trotter* and the *Shamless Parody*, since the device of giving Barry and Ermine (Harry and Hermione, of course) a son who must in turn go to the Hogs-wizarding school does allow better targeted pot-shots at what Rowling actually wrote—from Sorting to Quidditch—rather than continually escaping into metafictional insanity like the earlier book.

Terry Goodkind, *Naked Empire* (2003): Eighth in the *Sword of Truth* sequence. There are some determined if lumbering attempts at moral complexity here, but the bad guys keep demonstrating their Badness by needlessly revolting sadism, which does rather pall. Then comes the incredibly original plot device whereby the hero gets

OSC: Wow! Glutton for punishment!

JWS: Yeah, it's a long one, but I'm endlessly fascinated by that book and the *Ender* series, so I return to it every now and then. But I've always wondered about your ideas for the phillips, and for the area outside the universe where a person can create something simply by imagining it. Are those ideas grounded in any sort of actual research?

OSC: There's no research in it, it's made-up stuff. But it's stuff I was thinking of and dreaming of when I was a kid, and I obviously worked on it as an adult to find plausible scientific claptrap to surround it with. There's a level at which I kind of believe that maybe that's how things work, and a level below that where I'm skeptical, and then a level below even that where I think oh sure! Why not! It's as good as anybody else's idea. But I'm definitely playing with the "cool idea." That's the sort of thing that stands out in a story: the "cool idea." My goal is to write stories where even if you don't really believe the cool idea refers to the real world, you'll still care enough to read the book.

JWS: But the theory is presented with such authority. It seems like you would have gotten some sort of feedback on it from the scientific community.

OSC: It's fiction; you always write with authority. That's why they call you an author. But no, I get feedback in the sense that people reading a news article about string theory or various things and might go, "Oh, it's just like *Ender's Game*," and I go, no not really. It's not like what's in *Xenoside* and *Children of the Mind*, but it's parallel in some ways and how interesting that they're finding things that end up pointing in similar directions. But I would be stunned if anything could be proven that would demonstrate that any of these things are

true because I am talking about things that are below the level of truth. You couldn't design an experiment to prove it.

JWS: I just wonder if it could inspire a scientist to think in a new direction.

OSC: You never know what can inspire scientists. I'm just pleased that some of the stuff I wrote in *Ender's Game* given credit for having inspired ideas that some very fine military theorists came up with that led to, shall we say, very speedy and effective victories in some campaigns we've fought. But I dare not suggest the ideas came from *Ender's Game*. Rather, the kind of people who would have the minds that would think of those kinds of ideas are also the people who would respond to the story of *Ender's Game* and be excited by it. It's cool that I've written a book that is valued by the kind of people who think like that.

JWS: Do you have a favorite or least favorite book you've written?

OSC: They're all my favorite at some point, especially when I've just finished them. They're all beautiful babies then. Some of them grow up to be really ugly teenagers, but that's the way it goes. I have to look at them and say, "well, I did the best I could at the time I was doing it." There's not a story I've written that I don't still care about as a story, but there's some I look back upon and wish I had handled differently, wish I had known more about the craft of writing then. But there are some that have different emotional resonance, of course. My novel *Last Boys*, for example, is based on me and my family, a lot of the details are based on what happened during our first year in Greensboro, North Carolina. Obviously that's gonna have important resonance for me. My novel *Saints* is the story of my people, the Mormon people, who immigrated from England and came to

poisoned and must consume an antidote of which only a single dose exists, divided among four individually useless vials of which three are hidden in widely separated . . . argh!

Rohin Hobb, *Fox's Fate* (2003): Concluding the *Tawny Man* trilogy, a sequel—albeit with a fifteen-year gap—to the *Enser* trio. Although I missed the first two volumes of this set, Hobb writes with sufficient charm and unobtrusive backfill to make latecomers feel welcomed. Indeed I found myself curiously pleased that our narrator Fitz has made a comeback from the gloom, decay, and premature senescence into which (for no very good reason) he'd settled by the end of that first trilogy. The plot is entertainingly convoluted, with many concealed motivations, and in the end unravels satisfyingly. One small caveat: It did seem a little much that the last-ditch Get Out Of Death Free card played in *Amassini's Apprentice* has not only been already repeated with variations in this new sequence, but happens yet again here, even more implausibly since this time the body is well into decay.

Dean Koonitz, *The Fate* (2003): Stalker/killer thriller with supernatural elements, in that the protagonist has a measure of ghostly protection but the boy victim he's guarding doesn't. Koonitz gives us an effectively alarming villain with a set policy of disrupting society via acts of chaos, a dark Merry Prankster; but the book seems inflated far beyond its natural length by (Goodkindianly) demonstrating this fellow's wickedness again and again as he remorselessly kills a whole series of accomplices to his ultimate Big Bad Plan. And being a deconstructionist professor, he naturally passes his spare time starving and tormenting a kidnapped colleague who gave offense by admiring such classics as Mark Twain. But of course.

Matt Ruff, *Sewer, Gas & Electric: The Public Works Trilogy* (1997): A single, standalone novel, despite the title. Surreal sf that distantly reminded me of *Iluminatus*, owing to such elements as vast conspiracy theories and daft doings on a colorful submarine. It happens in 2023, years after a selective holocaust that has wiped out virtually all black people which proves to have been no accident. That favorite paranoid theme of deadly wildlife in New York's sewers provides one incidental menace, a great white shark called Meisterbrau that tirelessly eats minor characters, suffers spurts of evolution thanks to—ahem!—eating a packet of mutagens, and is clearly destined for a role in the socio climax. (Meisterbrau? Cunning spin from the N.Y. Dept. of Sewers Zoological Bureau, which eagerly refers to appalling fauna by the longest possible Latin species names, while individual

sharks are cozily nicknamed for heer brands. "There's bacteria loose in the tunnels they don't even have lang names for yet.") Besides an eccentric human cast—some of them rather underused—the novel features three self-aware AIs. One is inimical and buried under Disneyland; one gets accidentally booted up during the narrative to function as an emergency plot device; and one simulates the personality of Ayn Rand, whose political theories are summarized and subjected to much knockabout analysis. The fiendishness of the arch-villain is made manifest when, to open a certain dread portal, the protesting AI Rand is compelled to speak the loathed password "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Then there are the eco-terrorists who like to sink ships intended for Antarctic exploitation, in televised spectacles involving such exotic weaponry as a 20 lb. kosher salami accelerated to Mach 9 with a railgun; the renegade robot servitors conducting a program of elaborately ironic homicides; the legacy of J. Edgar Hoover, who turns out to have a lot to answer for; and more, and sillier. The finale involves a wondrous choreographed sequence of assaults on—and above, and beneath—the world's tallest building, in a tongue-in-cheek attempt to outdo every Bond extravaganza, while, of course, the clock ticks towards an apocalyptic explosion. Very entertaining on a page-by-page basis, but I felt distinctly uncomfortable about the use of deliberate racial genocide as a mere background device for a comic romp, and we've all read a few too many stories featuring all-encompassing, manipulative, and machine-planned schemes that finally go astray thanks to human guttiness (notably on the part of our tough, liberal heroine) and convenient random factors (notably Meisterbrau).

Tricia Sullivan, *Someone To Watch Over Me* (1997): This one provoked mixed feelings. This story of the grim, visceral implications of possible future mind control/transfer technology is well written, but somehow I couldn't muster any empathy for the variously hellbound characters, and I kept feeling I wanted a shower as respite from successive doses of in-your-face sordidity. A not-untypical moment: "Squatting in the bathtub slick with sweat she watched the blood, skin oil, semen and tears mingle and slither toward the drain." Yes, I know we all have occasional days like that, but. . . .

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America. And *Enchantment* is my best novel. I'm really excited by what I was able to do with that because it was a really hard novel to write and I feel like I pulled it off. *Patience* I think is my best science fiction novel, so I guess that would make it a favorite. But then *Ender's Game* has been very, very good to me. It's the foundation of my career, so that's a favorite. There are all kinds of ways books can be favorites, each in its own way. That sounds like a dad talking about his kid, but it's true.

JWS: You're such a prolific writer as well. . . .

OSC: Well it sure doesn't feel that way from my end. I see all the time I waste and the months in which I don't write anything and it feels to me like I'm only using about a sixth of what I should be producing and so it's frustrating. But hey, if I look prolific from the outside, cool! I can't complain about that.

JWS: So the act of writing is laborious for you?

OSC: No, when I'm actually doing it, it's very fast. But building up to the concentration and keeping the concentration is very hard. And it's especially hard because now that my books are better known I'm in more demand. I'm invited to do cool things that they very hard to turn down. Like this convention I did in Israel. I couldn't afford the time to do that, but I am going to turn down the chance to go to Israel, not as a tourist, but as somebody who has the chance to talk with Israelis about their life and find out what they're going through? I couldn't pass that up. I'm going to Barcelona over Thanksgiving to speak at a university there, but that's because I love Barcelona, and it's a chance to take out nine-year-old daughter with us and expose her to

a really beautiful part of the world that we fell in love with the last time we were there. How do I turn those things down? But then how do I write books when I'm doing that kind of thing all the time? I gotta have six or seven weeks where nothing else is happening to get a book done, and I don't have a lot of those periods of time anymore.

JWS: Six or seven weeks—is that about how long it takes you to write a book?

OSC: Once I start typing. Once I've solved the initial problem, it's usually about four weeks. Depends on the length of the book of course. But a usual 100,000-word book, it's about 10,000 words in the first week, and the last week is about 40,000 words. You do the math. It speeds up once I've done all the adventures and the story just flows to an ending. Part of it is I have a bad memory. I have to write it pretty quickly in order to hold it all in my head. I write in an oral style. I write so my stuff can be read aloud, and therefore, to me, as I write the book, I'm really kind of speaking it, and I type very fast—about 100 words a minute—and so it flows out as if it were being spoken to an audience sitting around a campfire listening to it. At least, I try for that effect and that allows me to move very smoothly because instead of honing the perfect sentence—which by the way is the worst way to write, because you end up honing only really horrible sentences—instead of sitting there working on the language, I'm working on the communication. I'm trying to talk to these imaginary listeners. ▶

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The Lost Steersman by Rosemary Kirstein

New York: Del Rey, 2003; \$14.95 tpb; 419 pages
reviewed by Jenny Blackford

In the August 2003 issue of *NTRSF*, I gave an enthusiastic review to Rosemary Kirstein's *The Steerswoman's Road*, a 2003 volume comprising *The Steerswoman*, first published in 1989, and *The Outsider's Secret*, first published in 1992. At the end of the volume, the brilliant thinker Rowan from the soft Inner Lands and her poet-warrior friend Bel from the dangerous Outsiders are both left in great danger, working to avert the disastrous clash between their people which the evil "wizard" Slado is apparently attempting to engineer. The books are crypto-sf, masquerading (as much of Gene Wolfe's work does) as fantasy. Most of the civilization of Rowan and Bel's world is at a medieval level, though the status of women is much higher. Wizards really do exist and are very powerful—Slado's "magic powers" include control of a geostationary satellite—but the reader understands that their magic is technology and cheers Rowan on as she works out logical explanations for various magical phenomena.

The overall structure of the novels, as well as current publishing tendencies, led me to expect that the sequel, *The Lost Steersman*, would be the long-awaited final book of the hypothetical *Steerswoman* trilogy. Ominously, the blurb describes *The Lost Steersman* as "the eagerly anticipated new novel by Rosemary Kirstein, critically acclaimed author of *The Steerswoman* and *The Outsider's Secret*," rather than as the sequel to the previous two books, though it does go on to summarize their action.

In fact, *The Lost Steersman* simply continues the story of *The Steerswoman* and *The Outsider's Secret*, without coming much closer to a conclusion. This was a problem for me on my first reading: I expected a major confrontation between Rowan and Slado, and I was frustrated at the apparently slow progress Rowan was making in her quest to find him. As a result, I found it difficult to concentrate on the seemingly less important actual events of the novel. My second reading was much more satisfactory: Rowan's hopeless attempts to fit into small-town life, and her painstaking exploration of the nature of the "demons" that attack the town, became fascinating in themselves.

At the beginning of the novel, Rowan is working through archived *Steerswoman* journals in the small seaside town of Alemeth, looking for any clues about Slado's nature, location, or powers. In the previous books, Rowan has established (by superb logical deduction backed up by brave exploration) that the wizard Slado is using his "magic" to cause the savage warrior Outsiders to attack the people of the Inner Lands; he has stopped the cycle of "Routine Bioform

Clearance," which used, to regularly open up new "Outskirts" for the Outsiders. (In Routine Bioform Clearance, a geostationary satellite burns an area past the Outsiders, killing the poisonous alien life there, and making it possible for the Outsiders, unwittingly, to terraform the cleared area by grazing their genetically engineered goats.)

While she is searching the journals in Alemeth, Rowan unexpectedly finds an old friend, Jason—the eponymous lost steersman. Jason went through training with Rowan, but later renounced his status and refused to explain his decision to a steerswoman. Steerswomen live by questions and answers; his refusal to answer a question has put him "under ban," and no steerswoman may answer any of his questions.

It is quite clear to the reader that Jason has become strange to the point of being sinister, but the tragically nice Rowan is convinced that she is to blame for his bizarre attitude to her, and that his frequent unexplained absences are innocent. The locals, unfortunately, know and trust Jason, and when he starts to spread rumors about Rowan, things go badly for her.

Meanwhile, fearful "demons" have started attacking the little town of Alemeth, killing people by spraying them with corrosive fluid from sacs between their four arms. Rowan not only rallies the townspeople to defend themselves but also dissects several of the beasts, deducing that they are examples of the quadrilaterally symmetrical life-forms typical of the Outsiders (i.e., as the reader understands, native to the planet). When more waves of demons attack the town and abduct Jason, Rowan sets off in search of him, convinced that the demons were sent by Slado.

The story then follows Rowan's dangerous and difficult search for Jason, and her meticulous observation of the strange, wonderful society of the demons. She is assisted in her search by another steerswoman, her exuberant one-legged friend Zenna, plus the most intelligent of the townspeople, twentysomething Steffie (male, despite the name), who discovers along the way that he wants to become a steersman. When Rowan finally finds Jason, his dreadful story is oddly like that of Fletcher, the complicated man Rowan loved in *The Outsider's Secret*.

The people of Alemeth are less exotic than the nomadic warrior Outsiders of the previous two volumes, and Rowan is dismayed to find them less likable, as well as less interesting. In fact, the author seems to have set herself the challenge of making small-town life, and

small-town characters, interesting; it may be that, like Rowan, she prefers the exotic. Kirstein has succeeded pretty well, but while Zenna and Steffie are good, complex characters, I missed the barbarian warrior woman Bel, who only makes a cameo appearance. Bel was one of the highlights of the first two books, and her interaction with Rowan was both touching and funny. Her talents—poetry and cooking, among others—were always surprising.

Despite Bel's scarcity, *The Last Steerswoman* is excellent. It has something of the feel of a young adult novel, without any of the possible downsides to that estimable genre. Perhaps this is because the author so clearly approves of knowledge, of questions and answers,

and of logical deduction, or perhaps it is because Rowan comes across as so very nice, while she considers herself quite the opposite. There are moral lessons in the book, but it is none the worse for that.

It would be possible to read and enjoy *The Last Steerswoman* without having read the other books first—Kirstein gives a good summary in the prologue, a letter written by Rowan to the Steerswomen's Prime—but it would be a less rich experience. *The Last Steerswoman* is a lovely book, which I recommend heartily. But, if you can, pick up a copy of *The Steerswoman's Road* and read it first. ►

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Star Dragon by Mike Brotherton

New York: Tor Books, 2003; \$24.95 hc; 352 pages

reviewed by David Mead

Star Dragon is a very readable, albeit slightly old-fashioned, science adventure set some four or five hundred years in the future. Relativistic interstellar space travel has allowed the expansion of human settlements across a number of worlds, and plausible advances in biotechnology have extended the span of human life and the range of potential life styles. Artificial intelligences of great power are omnipresent but not omnipotent (no "Spike" has occurred), so that when mysteries must be solved, humans are still needed for their special intuition and pattern recognition. When the Biotech Corporation learns that there may be an exotic, commercially exploitable life form resident in the accretion disk around the primary star of the dwarf nova binary SS Cygni, it recruits a small research team to go find, and capture if possible, this "star dragon." However, since SS Cygni is some 245 light-years away, the crew will be gone from Earth some 800 years, exchanging everyone and everything they know now for the rewards of the hunt.

Almost all of the narratives that treat relativistic interstellar travel—for example Haldeman's *The Forever War*, Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Panshin's *Rule of Passage*, Heinlein's *Universe*, or Alastair Reynolds's recent novels—emphasize the breaks between the planetary cultures and the travelers whose visits occur sometimes centuries apart. Sometimes the focus is on the changes that occur in the cultures on the various worlds over the long periods of time between visits, but more often (I think) the emphasis is on the travelers, who find community only among themselves. *Star Dragon* focuses on the developing relations among the crewmembers of the research vessel *Karamoja*—Captain Lena Fang, exobiologist Samuel Fisher, physicist Sylvia Devereaux, biosystems engineer Axelrod Henderson, jack-of-all-trades Phil Stern, and Papa (Hemingway), the ship's Brain—as they plan and then conduct their hunt for the mysterious creatures that live in and on the stellar plasma spiraling into SS Cygni's white dwarf.

As you might expect from other team adventures (like the films *The Professionals* or *The Dirty Dozen*) and voyage narratives like Melville's *Moby Dick*, the hunters have to sort themselves out before they can deal with their prey, and each crew member has to find his or her own balance and place in the collective in order for the mission to succeed. Each is a driven individualist with an agenda. Each has a very strong motive for leaving the present (but not the past) to fish an uncertain future, to risk everything aboard what sometimes seems a ship of fools for what may well be a stellar will of the wisp.

Before they even get near a star dragon, Lena Fang (her name is a clue to her character) and Sam Fisher the scientist are battling, sometimes literally, over how they will catch their as-yet-unknown prey. Both want a trophy catch, but Fisher, a monomaniacal loner scientist who lives for the joy and adrenaline rush of discovery, is obsessed with taking the dragon alive. Will he discover, for the first time, intelligent alien life? Is it an artifact? What are its secrets? Captain Fang, who is driven to prove that she deserves her command—and to make amends for a terrible failure in childhood—simply wants a specimen to take home, living or dead. She won't risk failure for scientific triumph. Their mutual need for a catch brings them together as lovers but also drives them apart as they struggle to define and conduct the hunt. Caught up in the contest between Fang and Fisher are the other crewmembers, each of whom has

a distinct motive and agenda. Simplest is Sylvia Devereaux, a game-playing physicist who just wants to solve the puzzle of the Star Dragon's nature. Phil Stern, a playful hedonist, is fundamentally uninterested in the project itself but eager to see the future without waiting, to enjoy the expansion of human possibility offered for his delectation by the five-hundred-year time debt. Like Fisher and Fang, Devereaux and Stern bond romantically, and in the course of the story educate each other about present joy and present responsibility. Axelrod Henderson is odd man out, and odd he is indeed. A manipulator of genes, he plans to defeat death biologically by using a virus to seed his own DNA so broadly across human space that "he" can outlast time. The failure of his experiments with hominoidal bait from his own germ plasm brings home the futility of his dream of individual immortality, and brings Henderson to see that his own survival depends on the larger community.

At one point early in the story Brotherton describes *Karamoja* as a blazing "silvery white whale," and chapter eight begins with an epigraph from *Moby Dick*, both suggesting we might look for parallels between the narratives. They are present but not simple: Fang, Fisher, et al. are not Ahab, Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask, drowned because they surrendered to lunacy. While the hunt for the star dragon takes several days and involves several encounters, in the end the crew of *Karamoja* overcome their monomaniacal selfishness, collaborate, agree on a plan, deal with failure, and survive because some of them are willing to sacrifice themselves for the common good.

Brotherton, an assistant professor of astronomy at the University of Wyoming as well as a graduate of the Clarion West writing workshop, has done a fine job of combining the scientific problem he wants to explore with the adventure plot and his cast of characters. The nature of the dragon and the astronomical setting seem very plausible to this unscientific reader, and the narrative of the hunt is intense and exciting, particularly after the capture, as the crew try to save *Karamoja* and themselves from obliteration in the accretion disk.

The allusions to Melville and to Ernest Hemingway's many hunts and fishing trips provide a rich background against which to see the struggles of Fang and Fisher, and Brotherton has chosen a wide variety of characters for the crew; they all seem to reflect the age in which they have lived in some way or other, expressing the values and concerns that scientists of their age might legitimately have—Will they be able to live forever? Will humanity be replaced by their artificial brains? Will they be able to pass their genes to progeny, or will all genes be artificially constructed? What will they find when they return to Earth?

This is a solid first novel. Brotherton blends an intense human drama, a rousing adventure story, and thoughtful, organic literary elements; for example, the bod-mod transformation by which Fisher makes himself a sort of human star dragon shows his monomaniacal obsession with the dragon but later, slightly changed, objectifies the saving emotional and intellectual transformation that he has undergone. I expect that Brotherton will soon find a place among the new breed of scientifically trained hard-sf writers—Reynolds, McAuley, and Baxter. I look forward to his next effort. ►

David Mead lives in Corpus Christi, Texas.

David G. Hartwell
Middle High Sturgeon

I became a dedicated reader and collector of science fiction, fantasy, and supernatural horror fiction, in the 1950s. At the end of that decade I went to college and won a book collection prize there, with only a hundred hardcovers. Among the ornaments of that collection were the Sturgeon books, including first editions of *Without Sarcery*, his first book, and *More Than Human*, his most ambitious novel. Part of winning the prize involved explaining something of the significance of the books.

Four decades later, I do not recall what I wrote then, but I do know that I had been introduced to Sturgeon's short fiction in the sixth grade and looked forward to everything by him from then on. And still vivid in my memory is the Saturday afternoon in late 1953 or early 1954 when I walked into a news store in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, where I had bought a few sf magazines before, and was pointed to the paperback book rack by the proprietor. There I found and bought my first two sf paperbacks, Sturgeon's *More Than Human* and Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*. That was the first year I bought and owned books, and these were treasures. I read them with intense concentration and delight. Nearly ten years later, after studying William Faulkner's novels, I reread *More Than Human* and liked it and admired it even more.

Somehow very early in my reading I came to think of Sturgeon as the best writer of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. I would read anything he published and follow him beyond my normal comfort zones because of the rewards of reading his stories, not something I

would do for many writers (such was my loyalty to sf at the time). I also recall my delight when he became a book reviewer for *Venture SF* in the late '50s and published his famous column explaining Sturgeon's Revelation ("Ninety percent of everything is crud") for the general readership—after it had first been revealed in a 1953 Phalcon speech and later reprinted in a fanzine.

He was one of Ray Bradbury's mentors (and Bradbury was at his peak then, publishing knockout stories and books). He was admired by Damon Knight, my favorite reviewer. Other writers and editors mentioned him in reverent tones in print. I thought he was a great writer.

I still do.

As the years passed, I began to attend sf conventions, read fanzines, and to hear gossip about Sturgeon, mainly about his writing blocks, his nudism, and his love life. He was famous for all three. I finally met him for the first time in 1972 at the Clarion writing workshop in East Lansing, Michigan, where he borrowed \$200.00 from me to make a payment that was pressing. Fred Pohl laughed at me the next week and said I would never get it back, but it was repaid shortly thereafter. I was so pleased that I would gladly have given up the money to know Sturgeon. At Clarion I was privileged to listen to his Monday morning lecture to the writing students, which was full of sophisticated and useful advice and ideas, so full that I could tell that the students were not getting much from it. But I still remember a lot of it and use it in my own teaching. There exist tapes of Sturgeon teaching a writer's workshop late in his life that may someday become commercially available.

Michael Andre-Driussi
"Real SF" Anime for People Who Don't Watch Anime

Okay, so you've watched *Spirited Away* and all the other Miyazaki movies you can get your hands on, and while you wait for the arrival of his next one (*Haw's Moving Castle*) you look out at that vast sea of Japanese animation, and you suppose there must be something worth watching but you don't want to wade through the Sturgeon Ratio in order to find the rare gold. Good news: I will share my notes with you.

I am looking for sf anime, but I have a low tolerance for mecha (powered armor fighting suits), cyberpunk retracts, giant robots, interdimensional demons, battleships in space, and teen investigators of the paranormal. Here are some I've found.

Wings of Hannekise: Royal Space Force (1987). 120 minutes; directed by Hiroyuki Yamaga.

I first learned of *Wings* from McCarthy's book *The Anime Movie Guide* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1996) wherein she has a "My Personal Top Ten" list, with Miyazaki movies taking positions one through four. *Wings* clocks in at number five. McCarthy writes of it:

Real science fiction, world-building worthy to stand beside Miyazaki's, and a great story. In my opinion this is one of the best sf films ever made. Its slow pace, length, and extended thematic development make demands on the audience which few Western directors would risk, but it succeeds magnificently. (28)

I was skeptical of this high praise until I saw the movie, whereupon I find I agree with her in all points: It is hard sf, and as such exists in a class by itself.

The setting is a world with a 1950s level of technology (jet fighters, black and white television) and several different aristocratic governments. The opening monologue of the hero ends this way:

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a Navy pilot. You had to join the Navy if you wanted to fly jets. They were so fast

[...] Flew so high [...] For me there could be nothing better than flying. But, two months before I was to graduate from school, I saw that my grades weren't going to let me do any of that. And so [...] I ended up joining the Space Force.

Thus, from the get go, the Royal Space Force is revealed to be a joke, a collection zone for losers and dreamers. But they struggle through and build their rockets, which look like blends of early NASA and Soviet vehicles. It is sort of like imagining Jules Verne's gentlemen scientists working with only an *October Sky* shoestring budget and coming up with a rocket that might put a man into orbit.

The animation style is a little rough, especially if you've just come off a Miyazaki jag, but it is used very well. The faces of characters are not the typical anime style (big eyes, small mouths, sharp features); in fact they look potato-ish, lumpy and dull, and this is a refreshing difference from the standard fare. Most surprising to me, however, is the way that they have captured the "Miyazaki stiffness" which is not as easy as it looks. This contributes to the "slow pace" that McCarthy notes.

The movie is also noteworthy for how it handles (an invented) organized religion: The spiritual belief system is neither denigrated as nonsense nor lifted into the realm of woo-woo.

Wings is not for kids! There is an attempted rape scene. You have been warned.

Voices of a Distant Star (2003). 30 minutes; directed by Makoto Shinkai.

This film is boggling for two reasons: On the technical side, it is stunning because it was done by one man on a Macintosh computer, yet it does not look like "computer generated animation" as we have come to expect—it looks like beautiful, two-dimensional, traditional-style animation.

On the other side, I'm recommending a mecha movie here because it is really that good!

Voices begins on Earth, in the middle of a campaign against alien invaders who blew up the domes of Mars. The characters are a middle-school boy and girl who are friends, shy boyfriend and girlfriend,

I arranged to interview Sturgeon at the 1972 World SF Convention in Los Angeles a month or so later for *Crawdaddy* magazine, in which I then had a science fiction column. It's a long interview filled with lots of Sturgeon's personal ideas and perceptions of books, stories about his life and friends, interesting stuff that I recommend to all interested parties. For instance:

I skipped two and a half years of my primary schooling. I left the fifth grade and took eight weeks in summer school and went to high school at not quite twelve years old. . . . And I was very underweight and undersized and a natural target for everyone around me. And I was pretty well brutalized by that whole thing. We didn't have school buses in those days and we lived three miles away and we used to have these six miles to walk every day through all kinds of neighborhoods. I had to figure out different ways to go each day, because kids would lay for me on the way. I had curly golden hair and I was very thin and kind of whey-faced and—pretty. And I was just an absolute target. When I was in high school I discovered apparatus gymnastics, and that became my total preoccupation. In a year and a half or so I gained four inches and sixty pounds, and I became captain and manager of my gym team, which is literally a transfiguration. I was totally born again. And the very kids that used to hully me used to follow me around and carry my books and it was a really incredible difference.

And:

Well, somebody brought me a volume I, number I of

only she has been selected to be a mecha pilot and must leave Earth to fight for humanity. As she travels around at relativistic speeds the time lag between the couple increases. She lives through the trauma of the initial months of separation (and boot camp and combat) while he survives the dull ache of years on Earth without her.

I have probably said too much already—it is only 30 minutes long! Because it is one of the few anime to deal with relativistic time lag (much like the 3.5-hours-long TV series *GnBuster* [1988–89] but distilled and sharpened) I think of it as being true sf anime, giving *Wings* some much needed company.

As a side note, this is one very rare case where I think that the English dub version is actually a little better than the Japanese version.

The DVD also comes with Shinkai's first film, *She and Her Cat* (2002), a five minute wonder that is devastatingly beautiful. I recommend this black-and-white short very highly. It is about a young woman who has a cat and I really cannot say any more. Go ahead, watch it five times in a row—I did. (Tip of the hat to Adam Stephanides, who recommended *Voices* to me based upon my quixotic quest for "true sf anime.")

Millennium Actress (2001). 90 minutes; directed by Satoshi Kon.

Set in Japan in 2001, a two-man documentary team is interviewing the elderly Chiyoko Fujiwara, a formerly great actress who has been in hiding for 30 years. What follows is a masterpiece of interview tales, where fact, fiction, and film blend and merge and crosspollinate. Ah, but is it sf, you ask? This may be the first "New Wave Fabulist" movie ever made.

Cowboy Bebop (1998–99), in six DVD volumes. 26 episodes of 25 minutes each.

First of all, I want to make it plain that I am *not* recommending *Cowboy Bebop*, the *Movie* because I found it to be a deep disappointment (almost as big a failure in going from the small screen to the big screen as *The Powerpuff Girls Movie* was). I am recommending the TV series *And what a series it is!*

Stunning soundtrack. Boggling animation. Exciting action-funny scenes. It is like eating potato chips.

The *Bebop* is a spaceship that flits around in the Solar System, mainly around Mars and the asteroid belt, but sometimes trips to

Unknown, and said, boy, this is what you should be writing. . . . I was absolutely thrilled with the magazine. And somebody suggested that I go up and see Campbell [the editor]. Well, you know, [I was overwrought, and so I wrote a little story and took it up to him, and he pointed out to me how that wasn't a story at all—it didn't have the structure of a story—but he told me to come back and see him again, and so I wrote a story called "Elder Brother," and that was my first sale to him. . . . I produced just continuously in those eighteen months, two years or so, I produced dozens of stories.

The full interview was published in *NTRSF* issues 7 and 8, March and April 1989.

I was also then a consulting editor for New American Library, and as a result of the conversations surrounding that interview I bought a collection of three novellas from him (it was my idea, because I wanted to have his last great novella, "When You Care, When You Love," reprinted in book form) that was published in paperback a year later as *Case and the Dreamer*.

I knew him for the rest of his life, not as a close friend but as a fellow professional. Whenever we met he would launch into a sincere monologue on his current obsession for a few minutes but would also frequently tell a joke or two. He had a reedy, nasal voice but told jokes well. Here's an example of his humor.

A young couple are in love, in bed, engaged in passionate foreplay, really beginning to work up a sweat.

She says: "Oh, god, this is so wonderful. It's like I am Queen Elizabeth and you are Sir Walter Raleigh," and with that she reaches orgasm, moaning and gasping with delight.

Venus, battered Earth, and the Jovian moons; "cowboy" is the future-slang term for bounty hunter; there is a system-wide TV show that broadcasts bounty data as entertainment. Initially the *Bebop* is crewed by Spike (the hero of the show, a man with a shady past) and Jet (an ex cop who owns the ship).

The show reminds me favorably of *Lupin III*. Spike has a lot of the uncanny dexterity and nimble clowning that is the trademark of master thief Lupin, and the team of specialists that accumulates around him is similar to Lupin's cast of friendly foes and sidekicks. But Spike is not just a Lupin clone—there is a dark side that is explored in the larger story arc.

Cowboy Bebop is a cool, jazzy, grungy, retro kind of sf adventure. I am reminded of fiction by Alfred Bester, William Burroughs, and Samuel R. Delany. (The TV show within the show reminds me of fictional *The Tenth Victim* crossed with real-life *America's Most Wanted*.) There are some hard sf details: There is no obvious artificial gravity (ships and stations use spinning habitat rings to create simulated gravity in many cases), there are no laser pistols (instead they use recognizable twentieth-century firearms that still use brass casings rather than more skuffy casless ammo), and in tact recognition of the transit times for ships traveling between the planets there is an itil "stargate" type of system for use within the Solar System only. (There are plenty of science-detail failures, but this seems typical in anime sf, so I applaud the successes where I can.)

The episodes range from great to only okay; the overall story arc is very good. I think the first disc is solid, the second disc is the weakest. In addition to the full set of six discs there is a "best of" disc that has six episodes: #1 "Asteroid Blues," #5 "Ballad of Fallen Angels," #19 "Wild Horses," #8 "Waltz for Venus," #17 "Mushroom Samba," and #24 "Hard Luck Woman." I think four of these are indeed among the best but—I would replace "Wild Horses" and "Waltz for Venus" with #11 "Toys in the Attic," and either #2 "Stray Dog Strut," #15 "My Funny Valentine," or #22 "Cowboy Funk."

I have just recommended 15 hours worth of anime! Some of these titles may be hard to find, but I am pleased to plug Netflix <www.netflix.com>, the DVD-rental-by-mail subscription service, where I rented all of the above except for *Wings*. ▀

The young man is still pumping away energetically. Minutes pass.

Suddenly in a frenzy, he has his orgasm.

Exhausted, in a fond embrace, he says, "Gee, sorry. It took me a few minutes to think of someone."

I also recall him telling me that it used to bother Harlan Ellison, when Sturgeon was living in his house in the late 1960s, that nudist Ted would answer the door without any clothes on. Ted liked to tell Ellison stories too.

He was known for singing and playing guitar at conventions in the 1950s. I only heard him do so once in the 1970s, when he was out of practice, but he was still good. I felt that way about most of his stories of the 1980s too, still good, but not at the top of his form—although I have not reread them in fifteen or more years now and reserve the right to do so and perhaps change my mind.

For most of the 1970s and 1980s, Paul Williams, Chip Delany, and I became a Sturgeon Admiration Society. Each of us was always ready to write about Sturgeon, recommend Sturgeon, discuss Sturgeon, bring his works to the attention of more readers. And he needed this, because for a really bright and talented man, he was just terrible at making money. I arranged to reprint some of his works in hardcover for the first time in the Gregg Press series in the late 1970s and commissioned introductions from Chip and Paul. Paul helped put together new Sturgeon collections for Dell in the 1970s, and later Bluejay in the 1980s. Chip Delany's enormous prestige as a critic maintained and enhanced Sturgeon's reputation in years when no fiction was published and powerful younger writers entered the limelight.

You are fortunate to hold in your hands (well, you would be, if you were reading this as the introduction to the ninth volume of the *Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*) a collection of Sturgeon stories from the 1950s, his greatest decade as a writer. As far as I am concerned, his major works of that decade were investigations and dramatizations of human psychology, driven by a synergy of idea and character. The two stories that mean the most to me in this book are "And Now the News" and "Affair with a Green Monkey."

The first is not by any useful definition science fiction (but see

Paul Williams's story notes at the end of the book for Sturgeon's opinion), though it did appear in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. It is simply one of the finest American stories of the twentieth century. It is a penetrating prophecy of what was going to happen too often in the next four decades, so often we now have a colloquial phrase involving the postal service for a certain kind of insanity. I read it when the issue was published, it worried me and I tried to reject it for several years. I think back to it frequently when the real world recapitulates it another time.

And (again see the story note) it was based on a core idea and detailed plot given to Sturgeon by Robert A. Heinlein, also at the peak of his reputation, who had been asked by Sturgeon to suggest ideas for stories. Heinlein said, "I must say that I am flattered at the request. To have the incomparable and always scintillating Sturgeon ask for ideas is like having the Pacific Ocean ask one to pee in it." (The entire letter was published in *NYRSP* issue 84, August 1995.) I get the idea from everyone I have spoken to over the years that nearly every sf writer in these days considered Sturgeon in some way the best.

"Affair with a Green Monkey" is both horrifying and funny, sort of like the joke I repeated above. It is also a clever and economical psychological portrait. And it really is science fiction.

There are other fine stories here (particularly "The Other Celia" and "The Skills of Xanadu"), and some only with fine moments, but all are worth reading, if only because they are the work of the sf writer of the 1940s to the 1980s who was at the same time writing in genre and successfully and consciously aspiring to art in his writing. He is one of the primary models.

On later generations, after Bradbury (who was influenced by Sturgeon's stories in *Aztec* and *Unknown* between 1939 and 1944, not the work of later decades), Sturgeon's fiction of the 1950s is clearly influential at the start of the careers of Samuel R. Delany and Roger Zelazny in the 1960s (not only the intent to entertain but also to create art in fantasy and sf; the use of telling and carefully observed detail to underpin characterization; a deep and complex understanding of, and portrayal of, human psychology; not only a fearless portrayal of sentiment, but also—particularly in Delany—a

Screed (letters of comment)

Farah Mendlesohn, London, England

Greer Watson's article was fascinating and offered some genuinely new ways of considering the writing of the fantastic, but I had problems with this statement:

all such divisions imply a theory of sets: all imply that subsets are definable by certain specific, mutually exclusive categories, and all assume the possibility of making clear distinctions. Even Attebery . . . overlooks the possibility of intersection and union.

Set theory does not preclude the possibility of intersection and union (or in modern parlance, hybridity). It specifically provides for it with the construction of the Venn diagram.

Taras Wolansky, Jersey City, New Jersey

Graham Sleight's review of the new Van Vogt collection from NESFA calls upon Damon Knight's "demolition job." Knight's archaism, even Gernsbackian critique has not weathered the years very well, however. Knight intends to condemn Van Vogt when he tells us that "By a glib use of quotations, and, I think, still more by a canny avoidance of detailed exposition, Van Vogt has managed to convey the impression that he has a solid scientific background." Considering that an sf writer is usually writing about science that doesn't actually exist, Knight would seem to

be describing a core competency of the profession.

Sleight's line readings of Van Vogt are also questionable. He quotes the following passage from Van Vogt's first story, "Black Destroyer": "Tenseness flamed along his nerves. His muscles pressed with sudden, unrelenting strength against his bones." Sleight responds: "Tenseness, not tension? Do muscles press against bones or work with them? Can strength be sudden and unrelenting?"

1. "Tenseness" suggests a predator tensing to spring; in this context, "tension" might imply anxiety, fear. (Or maybe the "t" on Van Vogt's typewriter was sticky.)

2. Muscles do indeed "press against bones" and even deform them, over time; otherwise, paleontologists and forensic pathologists could never reconstruct musculature from skeletal remains.

3. A "sudden" onset followed by an "unrelenting" continuation would be typical of a predator's attack, for example; here, it's an evocative way of saying that the predator, Coeur, has suddenly tensed his muscles and hasn't relaxed them.

Sleight also criticizes "Vault of the Beast," Van Vogt's first written but second published story. I believe, for being too exciting ("Van Vogt . . . is not a calm writer"). Thanks; if I want calm writing, I can always reread Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy!

fascination with love, sex, and gender roles; and a constantly surprising but consistent evocation of cultures unlike our own—that then reflect back upon our own in pleasant or disturbing ways. This is the core of what I meant above when I referred to a synergy, a complete blending, of idea and character as the driving force of his fiction).

If Sturgeon's influence had extended only this far, it would have

been crucial to the evolution of contemporary sf, horror, and fantasy. But it extends much farther. There are more volumes in this series to come, including more of his very best. ►

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The Journal of Nicholas the American by Leigh Kennedy

Abington, Oxfordshire: Big Engine, 2002; £9.99 tpb; 182 pages

reviewed by Joe Sanders

Noting that *The Journal* was a Nebula Award nominee for 1986, readers may wonder why they haven't heard of it. A look at the list of Nebula winners answers part of that question: The winning novel for that year was Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, whose sequel won the award the next year and whose proliferating descendants continue to satisfy a large audience. And that brings us closer to answering the question of why such a well-written, thoughtful book has been languishing in obscurity for so long. In the *Ender* series, as elsewhere, Card is extremely effective at offering comforting, shallow answers to disturbing, profound questions. Kennedy, on the other hand, raises tough questions that her characters have trouble facing, let alone answering, and tries to get readers involved deeply enough with the characters to puzzle out what's troubling them—and to consider the disturbing possibility that some important human questions may be unanswerable.

To begin with, the novel's title is a lie. The narrator's name is Nicholas Alexandrovich Dal, but he's not simply an American; he is burdened by too much tangled family history from Russia that he can't release. He insists otherwise because he must deny his past, his identity. He is an empath. Instead of telepathy, which in theory would be useful because it would let him read other people's thoughts, Nicholas's wild talent overwhelms him with the emotions of people around him. His seemingly talented family fled Russia because of some violent act, details and even acknowledgment of which again are imperfectly suppressed. Now Nicholas would like to insist that, no, he's nothing out of the ordinary, just another perpetual student hanging out on the fringes of a big university. Just an unambitious American slacker. One with a drinking problem too, since he has discovered that liquor dulls his awareness of others' emotions and so spends as much of his time as he dares in a semi-stupor.

He is, in short, the most frustrating kind of student for a teacher to encounter in a classroom. Every few courses, I'd run into someone like this: emphatically inert, never obnoxious in class but never giving what he or she could to the class—judging from tests and class papers that showed glimpses of original thinking and from occasional knowing glances that showed, "Yeah, I know where the discussion went off track; I'm just not going to do anything about it." I would have been irritated to see Nicholas wasting time in one of my courses. I wouldn't have understood why he behaved that way. He would have rejected any expression of concern; in fact, coming out of his shell would have been literally sickening.

A character like this is singularly unpromising material to build a novel out of. The quality that makes Nicholas extraordinary feels like a curse. The only way he can control it is by getting drunk enough to smother it, and in the process he's eroding his personal human potential. The more he feels, the more he is hurt. One of the main characters of Scott Westfield's *Succession* series (consisting so far of *The Rising Empire* and *The Killing of Worlds*) is an empath who would be overwhelmed by the emotions of people around her if she didn't have machines to monitor her condition and drugs to muffle her sensitivity; nothing like that is available for Nicholas. He has to make do in a contemporary, realistically limited, non-sf world. Yet, somehow, Kennedy's book isn't depressing. It's actually exhilarating to watch her work with Nicholas and his situation, creating the journal that reveals far more than he would choose to do and that also shows him as more than a whining victim. He is a man who has been pushed to an extremity but who hasn't given up. He has learned to

live without hope, alone.

The novel also shows, though, that safe isolation is as impossible for Nicholas as it is for us nonempaths. He still hangs around the school, attending classes and at least going through the motions of getting an education, and he is still ready to respond when one of his female classmates, "Jack," approaches him and they begin an affair. Being an empath can help one achieve good sex, but being emotionally attuned to someone else is distressing most of the time anyway. Even though Nicholas discovers that he loves Jack, he shoves her away too far, too often, just to avoid being overwhelmed. And then he meets the rest of her family, including her dying mother. . . .

This is a considerable sf novel of character. It may fudge in its last pages a bit to give Nicholas more hope of living with others like himself, who will understand him and with whom he can relax his defenses. Or, considering how well the conclusion has been prepared for since early in the action, it may simply demonstrate that empathy is a blessing as well as a curse. Personally, considering how Kennedy has refused to settle for easy, safe solutions throughout the book, I'd give her the benefit of the doubt. This is, according to the author's bio, one of only three books Kennedy has had published, which is unfortunate for all of us. We need more of it that tries to look honestly but compassionately at the human condition. It's too easy to be overwhelmed by new possibilities; it's also far too easy to tell ourselves that any new stuff will turn out merely to complement what we already know or are. Books like this one begin by looking at someone from the crowd of walking wounded—someone we might joke as we trudge along—and ask, "What does that feel like?" and then, "Well, what's next?" It's good to have *The Journal* available again to remind us that such sf can be written and that perhaps we readers need to develop some of our own empathic skills. ►

Joe Sanders lives in Mentor, Ohio.



William Gibson in motion at the 92nd Street T to Manhattan

Neither Snow, Nor Sleet, Nor Freezing Rain

Yes, well, there was a blizzard here in Pleasantville on December 4th and 5th, 2003, the earliest big winter storm since the beginning of record keeping in 1846 and the second biggest December storm on record for New York City and environs. Today the accumulated snowfall listed in *The New York Times* for Thornwood, New York, the nearest hamlet to our house, was 20 inches. Because of the drifting in my yard and driveway, it was hard to determine if we had that much, or more—Kathryn, who walked in it, claimed at least 14 inches by 6 p.m. Saturday—but it sure looked like a lot to shovel when I went out to start at 8:30 A.M. Sunday morning.

And so no one was able to attend this work weekend on Friday or Saturday, leaving it to Kathryn and me to work here, and Kevin and his family to read and proof at their home in Yonkers until today, Sunday, when Kevin was finally, by a bit after 2 p.m., able to arrive here and marry his pile of edited manuscript with ours so we could start issue production. An hour after that, Kathryn (ninety-nine pounds, strong like ox) and I had finally shoveled enough snow so his car, and our two, would all fit in the driveway. Then I rested a while, read some more, and we started layout, cutting corners wherever we could. Lack of volunteer staff present means some work cannot get done. We are going to have to catch up on editing forthcoming pieces, for instance, and quickly.

Saturday was also the day Kathryn and I had been planning to go to Sears and buy a snow blower. Every work weekend is unique. We have had blizzards before, but this one started early enough on Friday to prevent arrivals, so the masthead this time is a record for sparseness. Never before have we done this with so few on the spot. We had done the grocery shopping and so we ate well (see Kathryn's blog at <www.kathryncramer.com/wblogs> for ostrich and bison recipes), and the furnace had been repaired Thursday afternoon, so on the whole, this was a warm, pleasant blizzard experience.

Our next work weekend, just after New Year's Day, will be a particular challenge, because we need to do two issues then to avoid missing an issue while Kathryn and I are in Australia. It is my sincere hope that the challenge of doing two issues then will be enough to give that weekend its unique character. But just in case, we are staying home after Christmas through New Year's.

—David G. Hartwell
& the editors



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190



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